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Timothy Larkin

BOOKS BY
JANE HUTCHENS

Timothy Larkin
John Brown's Cousin

Timothy Larkin

By

JANE HUTCHENS



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FIRST EDITION

To
FOUR GRANDMOTHERS
POLLY ANN DOUGLASS
MARTHA JANE ROGERS
FANNIE BAKER
and
EMILY HUTCHENS

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PROLOGUE

October 1836, Mississippi River Bank

TIMOTHY lay flat on his stomach and watched the path along the Mississippi River. He would spring out before his pap when he heard the solid tramp of his boots. Not fast and ringing like Ma's steps, but slow and solid with time between for Pa's long-legged stride that scissored away, even and slow. It didn't matter to Tim that he hadn't heard his pa's step for nearly nine months, way back in February, and then on the banks of the Ohio River. A step like Pa's wasn't one you could forget. Pa stalking down to the raft, his head back, his shoulders swinging as if the ax and gun he carried made no pull at all on his right side.

Pa had stood there on the dizzily tugging raft, to wave back to them. Tim's pa was taller than the other two men, his hair and beard blacker, his cheeks redder, and his voice so much louder that it drowned out the others when he shouted good-by and bent down to loosen the rope that still bound them to the Ohio bank. Timothy couldn't hold himself steady up on the

bank with the others but ran down and leaped the fringe of ice and water gap to clasp his pa about the waist.

"Take me, take me, take me."

Patrick Larkin's deep laugh was not steady. "Somebody's got to stay take care of your ma."

"Drew and Perry can."

Andrew was almost twelve and Perry less than half that old, but to see them up there with Minerva and the others gave Tim no agony of separation such as he had felt when he saw his pap on the raft. It must have had something to do with the solid look of earth compared to the flowing river. There was something you couldn't trust about water.

Tim could hear his mother calling from the high bank, but he wasn't paying attention.

"I can help pole the raft," he begged. "You said yourself I was big to my age."

"Son," Patrick bent to lay down the gun and ax without loosening Tim's hold, and then he slowly ran his big hands over Tim's thick black hair, down to his lean narrow shoulders, "You ain't goin' to be a cry baby. Why, I was aimin' to give you my fish knife, but from the way you're takin' on I guess you ain't big enough to handle it."

Tim's arms relaxed slowly. He stepped back to look up into his pap's blue eyes. "I'm big."

Patrick took the knife from his belt. The knife that had dressed catfish with four easy strokes, the knife that could skin a squirrel as easy as shucking corn or that could peel the scales from crappie like bark from a hickory log.

Tim could hear his ma shouting again, orders that should be minded, but his pa kept right on. He lifted Tim's two hands and laid the knife in them. The holster was made of pigskin instead of cowhide, because Pa'd said it was tougher. Tim could feel the weight of the knife as his pa withdrew his big hands.

"It's yourn to keep. Now run up the bank to your ma and the boys and I'll be back before you can learn to skin a deer."

And now, on another river and in another state, Tim lay in wait for his pa and didn't heed his ma's voice.

The wagons couldn't go off without him. He knew even his ma didn't have that much spunk. Folks in Ohio had thought she wasn't a natural woman when she didn't go home to Pennsylvania when her husband didn't come back from running the raft of logs to New Orleans. One of the women figured it all out too certainly of how, because of the floods, the raft had been wrecked and all three men drowned before they even got out of the Ohio River.

"They could all swim," Minerva had said. "I ain't aimin' to give up waitin' for Patrick until I see somebody that saw him dead, or goin' down for the third time. He might-a got hurt and held up some, but Patrick Larkin, lovin' life like he does, ain't just goin' to shut his eyes and let himself drown."

And so she had gone right on packing and making plans every day just as if Pa would be back by evening. When the six wagons for Missouri were ready to take out, Minerva Larkin loaded her three boys and drove her own ox team.

"He'll be waitin' at the Mississippi expectin' me and the young uns," Minerva had said, "I told him if anythin' should happen that he got held up, we'd meet him on the fur side of the river. I ain't aimin' to disappoint him. We got grub for the winter."

And now she was shouting up and down the river bank, "Timmy, Timothy Taylor Larkin," while Tim was making himself flat in the weeds that overlooked the path. He and his ma had walked over the streets of St. Louis this morning, naming it to every stranger who would listen that they were there waiting for Patrick Larkin. And here, even his ma would go off without Pa.

Tim could see his ma's shadow, now stretching to the east. He could almost feel the cool of it as it passed over him. Nearly as tall as Pap and just as Scotch as he was Irish. "North Irish" Ma always added.

"I ain't aimin' they should find me, Pap; I'll make 'em wait till you come up this path from N'Orleenes, and I be the first to whoop out for you."

But the October sun went down behind the woods, and a damp wind came off the Mississippi.

Tim tightened his hold on the knife to give himself courage. The stings of mosquitoes became torture. Active physical torture that he could despise and scratch, and that was easier than the thought that somewhere along this dirty river, maybe on a bank where his bones were bare, or in the bottom of the stream where Tim couldn't dare let his imagination go, was his pap.

Wherever his pap was, he was upright and strong with the blackest beard and hair a body ever laid eyes on, and he'd find his family and make a fortune in Missouri and probably own slaves before he died.

Timothy was beset by hunger. "Pap wouldn't want me to lay here and starve plumb to death," he said to himself. No, his pap wouldn't want that. There wasn't a man alive who liked good victuals better than Pap.

As the moon rose from the Illinois bank and dropped shattered light on the river, Tim ran down the path to the wagons, his bare feet pounding a sound to his ears like panting boogers.

"I've a mind I should whale you good," Minerva Larkin said as she held Tim so tight he had to sob to get his breath, "but I guess I'd-a done the same thing if I'd-a thought I could. Bein' as big as I am a body cain't hide. Besides, there ain't time. Git up in that wagon and under them covers; you're cold as a frog and nigh eat up with mosquitoes."

She didn't say a word about supper.

Tim could feel the creaking of the wagon, and little Perry's breathing on his neck, so he made a hard knot of his fists against his hollow stomach and tried to go to sleep.

Ma must have promised the others that she'd drive by moon-

light and reach their camp somewhere off in the west away from the river damp and mosquitoes, and far away from the path their pap might take.

It didn't make any difference that she had told dozens of people at every stop and encounter, "If you see my man you'll reco'nize him. He's over six feet tall and walks like a lazy Irishman, but that's because his legs is so long he don't ever have to seem to hurry. Tell him his wife and three boys went this way, aimin' to take up land in maybe Clay or Ray County."

It had sounded sure and good in Tim's ears when she said it, but tonight he couldn't get back a jot of comfort. He should have stayed out in the weeds to starve.

Ox teams are slow, and even with the goadings by turns of three boys and a woman it took thirty-one days from the Mississippi River bank to Clay County, and Tim was wearing his older brother's shoes, and little Perry was wearing Tim's, and Drew had his feet wrapped in sacking, for there wasn't a cobbler with time to make a pair of boots to fit his growing feet.

And so it was Tim who walked through the snow up to the big house to ask if anybody there knew about any land that wasn't taken and could they stay the night, because the snow was getting mortal cold and somehow they had lost track of the other wagons.

To Timothy Larkin, who had lived in the backwoods of Ohio in a one-room log cabin, the house was terrifying in its size. He blew on his hands before he knocked. At first he had thought he should shout, but to shout at this house would be like whistling in a church.

Some way, Tim expected a giant to open the door instead of this little black boy who drawled, "Yes, suh?"

His astonishment held him dumb, standing there staring into a hall as big as a whole cabin, watching the snow swirl in and hold its shape on the little colored boy's wool.

A voice drawled from the other room, not too easy, but determined and loud, "Bring 'em in and shut that door."

"Nothin' but a young un," the words seemed to rise as a wind from all the people in the big, crowded room. Fat people, warm people, sitting on store-bought chairs with "made on" cushions in front of a fireplace big enough to stall an ox. Tim felt so mad he wanted to kick at the red bird dog that came toward him.

"Down, Bulow!" The same slow commanding voice.

Tim was madder yet, because he couldn't just fix on which of all these people was talking. He took a stance in the middle of the floor and stared about. "My folks—" He didn't know how he intended to finish. A lump came up in his throat so hard that it knotted his speaking.

"Folks? Where?"

And Tim knew the big voice came from none of the big men in the room but from the screwed-up little man on the settle. It gave Tim a queer feeling on the back of his neck, as if he'd heard a little feist yap come out of the throat of this big bird dog.

"Folks, out in the snow under a canvas cover."

"Might as well come over to the fire and warm y'self."

The circle of people, grown men and women and half-grown boys and girls, started to inch their chairs about to leave a space so that Tim could walk up before the settle where the little man sat with his feet drawn up beside him as if they might not be able to reach the floor. His arms and shoulders looked big for his size, and the top of his head was like the big end of an egg.

"We're from Ohio, come to settle a piece of land, me and my ma and two brothers."

"You ain't the biggest, aire you?"

"No." He was glad he'd come instead of Drew, for he wasn't shamed by his shoes. He hated to add what his ma had said; it sounded too beholden in this big rich room, but he had to.

"Ma said, could we drive up behind your barn, or somewheres out of the wind?"

"Jemima, more company," the little man shouted. Then to Tim, "How many did you say they was?"

"Me and my ma and my brother Drew and little Perry."

"Wes!" the man boomed without seeming to put effort at all into his voice. A tall black man came from the back room. "Go fetch that woman and her young uns from the wagon and send Whipple to put up the team, and tell Charlotte there'll be four more to dinner."

"Yes, suh."

This black man didn't drawl like the little boy or whine high and lazy; he talked sharp.

Tim turned to go out behind the black man.

"No use your goin', son," the biggest of the three white men said. "Wes and Whipple will take care of your ma. Mighty cold out, ain't it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Been long on the road?"

"Thirty-one days from the river." Suddenly the big room was too hot and Tim felt sick in his stomach. "From the river" sounded so final. His pap wouldn't ever come to make them rich like these folks here in their fine house with niggers to wait on them.

"And no man with you?" the man asked.

Tim looked down at his brother's shoes, "No, sir."

There was a little girl not much larger than Perry who came to lean on the arm of the settle. If Tim hadn't caught sight of her big gray eyes staring at him, he knew he would have given over to his stomach or his tears.

"You can ride my pony," the little girl said in a high clear voice, just as if she understood the conversation needed changing.

"We've got oxes," Tim boasted.

"We have too, but you can't ride an ox."

The older people in the room laughed.

"Give him time, Polly Ann. He'd probably be more civil if you asked him to take off his coat. "Jemima!" this time he practically bellowed.

The back door opened, and a woman as big as Ma came into the room. But she didn't look like Ma, who wore flat shoes, and a slat bonnet, and homespun clothes that dropped almost straight to the floor from her waist. This woman was wearing a silk cap with a ruffle on top of her head and a skirt that swung out around her and covered her feet so that she looked to be moving across the floor on wheels. Tim knew from seeing women on the Mississippi ferry boat that she wore silk petticoats that rustled when she walked.

"Did you call, Jamie? I thought I'd have time to finish the sauce for the bu'd before I had to come in."

How Tim hated her! It didn't enter his head that all these people in this room didn't belong here and that this woman was all dressed up for company. The only thing that mattered to him was the pucker of irritation that was on the woman's face and the fact that she had come from her own kitchen in a silk petticoat.

He wanted to rush out and tell his ma not to come in here where she would feel ashamed, where Drew's wrapped feet would be a disgrace the Larkins could never live down. He wished they'd stayed in Ohio or gone back to Pennsylvania, where his ma had a lot of folks of her own—ten brothers and sisters—they could fill a room up fuller than this—bulge out the walls and crowd the floor with children where a body wouldn't feel an outsider.

But it was too late. The black man was bringing in Minerva Larkin and her other two sons. Tim stood there scowling at them as if they were strangers.

"It was mighty kind of you," Minerva was saying to the woman in the silk cap, who was cross at having extras.

Minerva reached up and took off her bonnet and loosened

the wool scarf about her head so that her red-brown hair fluffed about her wide, high forehead. "We don't aim to put you out none. You look like you already got enough company." But all the time her eyes and smile were seeking about the room with a hunger that Tim would never have dared to show. She seemed to include the entire room in her good humor and thankfulness. She had to bend to take Perry up in her arms to keep him from throwing her down in his effort to get behind her skirt. He was spindly for five, and his legs dangled into Tim's boots, which suddenly looked as if they would fall off if he didn't crumple his toes.

Drew stood as straight as an Indian; his head reached Ma's shoulder even when he stood practically on his bare soles. His cheeks were red and his smile even quicker and more all-inclusive than Ma's. Tim was conscious of his own scowl, and yet could do nothing to change his expression.

"We somehow got lost from the other wagons," Ma was saying. Her voice was lower, quicker, and better humored than the other woman's, Tim thought. His ma wasn't beholden. She took the chair one of the men offered her and sat down on the "made on" cushions as if she'd always sat on store chairs. "We're expectin' my man to come through now just any day."

Tim's heart felt leaden. Did she really believe it, or was it just to keep their spirits high, like the way she combed her hair every night, even in the coldest weather, because she didn't want Pap to come and find her looking like a sloven.

"Please, don't go to a bit of trouble, it's so comfortin' to be inside four walls that we could be content just to sit and thaw our bones."

"No trouble at all," the little man hurried to say. (Tim noticed it wasn't the woman.) "Wes, bring chairs from the parlor. We come from Kentucky ourselves, ten year ago. Arnett's the name."

"Ours is Larkin."

"Glad to make your acquaintance, Mrs. Larkin." His brown

beard parted in a nice smile. "Jemima here and me come through with her brothers and their families ten year ago, and if it hadn't been for Judge Wayford here, who advanced me five hundred dollars, I'd have had to sell Wes or Charlotte to keep us goin' while I waited for the letter of credit."

"Thas right, Mis't Jamie."

The little girl on the settle who had offered Tim a ride on her pony came forward and took Drew by the hand to lead him closer to the fire. She was wearing yarn stockings with red and blue stripes going round and round, and her hair was the color of foam on cooking soap.

Suddenly Tim hated her too, because she hadn't come for him, and then she reached out with her free hand and caught his, still cold and rough against her smooth plump palm, as warm as a kitten.

"I'm glad you came," she said.

Tim heard himself saying, "So am I."

When Tim was fourteen he still knew that Polly Ann Arnett and her little black pony had meant more to him that first year in Missouri than everybody else and every other thing put together. Those two sort of made up for the fact that his pap didn't come, day or night, though his ma never stopped looking for him and keeping herself fixed up.

She even told the boys, as she taught them to read and write, "We'll just skip the figgerin' till your pap comes home. He's so much better at ciphers than me."

Drew, who was past sixteen, would never dare look at Tim when she said that. Both boys were getting ashamed that they were so big and yet couldn't figure except on their fingers, while little Polly Ann could do sums in her head.

The boys were mighty proud when Mr. Arnett sent word around over the neighborhood by his slave, Wes, that some of the men had got together to bring in a teacher to hold school for three months in one of Judge Wayford's cabins. All parents

should send their children, and with them what they could spare toward the teacher's pay, which was by rights eight dollars in cash or produce for each child.

And now Tim Larkin sat on a puncheon bench before a puncheon desk and watched the teacher, who was almost as big as Tim's pap, check off the names of the scholars with their contribution toward his salary.

Tim did wish Polly Arnett would get there before he and his brothers took up their pay, for he wanted her to see. He knew she'd be almost as proud as Ma of the twelve pairs of socks, hand knit in the teacher's size, that Perry had, and the woollen material enough to cut a coat that was Drew's, but most of all the blue and white coverlid woven in the orange peel pattern that Tim held in his own arms.

Of course Ma could have sent a bag of oats, or wheat, or corn, with a load of potatoes and squashes and turnips, but she thought that would look too shiftless coming from a woman who was managing to do her own work—as if she didn't have time to get in any weaving.

"I'll take you as you came in," the teacher said, taking out a small book and turkey-quill pen. He was Judge Wayford's nephew and was reading law in his spare time. He stood very straight and tried to make himself look old by frowning when he spoke. "Bring your tuition up to my desk and I'll check you off. Some of you may be planning to make only a partial payment this morning. I'll be the judge of that. First!"

A new girl, whom Tim had not seen before, went forward, carrying a bag of something that might be either oats or shelled corn, a string of onions, and a great wisp of hackled hemp.

"Harmony Smith," the girl said. Tim could see that she had dimples and big blue eyes. "These is my sister and brothers, that's Josie, and here's Jimmie and Willie."

Three barefooted, shabby Smiths trailed to the front.

"We'll bring more later," Harmony said, with a laugh so hearty that you'd have thought she'd said something funny.

Perry looked at Tim, a kind of prideful contempt on his narrow pale face. Tim knew Perry looked the way all three of the brothers felt, though Drew and Tim were too big to let themselves be so unmanneredly frank.

Tim did think the Smiths could have managed to twist that hemp into some kind of a usable rope. Shiftless, Ma would have called them.

"Next!" The teacher's voice was edgy.

"Zeb Newby." A boy who was as old as Drew, but not quite so big as Tim walked to the front carrying two pumpkins and wearing a string of red peppers around his neck.

"Partial payment," the teacher said.

Tim saw Zeb's blunt features turn red and knew he must feel almost as hot as the peppers.

Suddenly Tim was mad. Not at Zeb Newby, because he'd brought only peppers and pumpkins, but at Zeb's folks for sending him off with so little. But Zeb's folks didn't raise any sheep, and they did well to keep themselves clothed and fed. Zeb's pa hated slaves. So did Zeb.

There were two other families to go up before the Larkins; the Blankinships and Alnuts. Tim wasn't going to look to see what they had brought. He let his look go seeking out the door to find if Polly Ann Arnett wasn't riding up on her pony. He could see far up the lane. Three horses were pounding toward the cabin, a sorrel, a bay, and a roan. He recognized the last two as belonging to the two older Arnett boys. Tim felt suddenly lost. What if Polly was sick? What if her pa had decided she was already too smart to have to go to school? What if—

But just that instant the three horses turned so that Tim could see that a girl was riding the sorrel. Polly Ann had a new horse! He almost shouted to the room.

Drew was punching Tim and whispering, "We're next, and I'll stuff this down his neck if he says 'partial payment' to me!"

Drew looked almost big enough to do it too, Tim thought as he gathered up his beautiful coverlid that Ma had made from

her own sheep's wool: sheared, washed, carded, spun, dyed, and at last woven on the big loom in the cabin.

The Arnetts weren't carrying anything so that you could see. No vegetables or grain bags across their saddles, no handmade materials, no coverlids or quilts. Tim knew all of that as well as he knew that his new boots hurt his toes and that there was a sticking pain in his back from sitting hunched over.

"Larkin," Drew was saying.

Drew was at least three inches taller, weighed ten pounds more, and almost needed a shave, Tim thought. What if Polly Ann would only see Drew? What if she'd think Drew was the best now, and ask him first to ride on her new horse?

"I'm Andrew, folks call me Drew. This is Tim and Perry, my brothers."

Just then the three Arnetts came into the room, Polly, as neat and trim as her own new saddle horse, and her two big brothers, who already had to shave. Tim felt all kinds of a fool standing there with the blue and white coverlid in his arms. All at once he knew what the Arnetts were bringing. His face burned, even though the teacher took Perry's socks with words of praise for the knitting, and Drew's woolen material with a hearty welcome, showing the cuffs of his coat, now wearing thin.

Tim wished he could thump a piece of money down on the desk and carry this coverlid back home where it belonged. He was ashamed of his very shame, because Ma had worked so hard. He knew he was mean and ungrateful, but he detested the teacher as he whipped the coverlid open and showed it to the children.

Zeb Newby's face was still red. Tim knew his own face was the same color.

"Paid in full," the teacher chanted, and then glanced up to see the Arnetts. He'd eaten a meal there once, so called them all by name.

Polly Ann came forward, her trim little boots making almost no sound. Tim knew she had changed less than he and Drew.

She was small for her age at twelve, but her mother didn't try to make her look young by dressing her childishly. She opened a little leather purse made on her belt and took out money. Her fingers were fine and deft, but Tim could tell she was scared, because she clamped her lower lip with her teeth.

"For me and my brothers," she said, as she laid the gold money on the desk. "Ten, fifteen, twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three, twenty-four."

"In full."

Though Tim Larkin could not cipher, he counted over to himself what Polly had said—all in dollars. Nobody would ever need to be white trash with that much money. Then Tim knew why Zeb fought so much. It was because he couldn't endure feeling belittled.

As if in answer to Tim's thoughts about Zeb, Tim heard him whisper so the Blankinships and Smiths would hear, "Nigger money, Nigger money!" Right then Tim hated Zeb Newby, even though he felt sorry for him. Such a lump came in his throat that it was hard to return Polly's smile as she passed the three Larkins on her way back.

"You may go outside till I ring the bell," the teacher was saying.

Tim turned when he heard a gay laugh. It was the new girl, Harmony, showing her dimples and fine bright teeth. That was another way of showing you didn't care. Maybe better than Zeb's. Tim knew he didn't have a way of showing he wasn't concerned. He just knew that never never would one of his children have to pay for his schooling with wormy pumpkins or even hand-woven coverlids, so they'd have the worry of having to cover up like Zeb or Harmony. His children were going to walk up like Polly Ann Arnett and lay down cash money and know how to count it out.

If Polly asked Drew to ride her horse first, because Drew was taller, and heavier, and in need of a shave, he'd go up to the

teacher's desk and ask could he try to write his name with the teacher's turkey-quill pen.

He felt something light touch his arm. There stood Polly Ann, her gray eyes solemn, her mouth as pink as if she'd just bit into a strawberry.

"Tim," she said softly, "I got a new horse."

PART I

January 1852

TIMOTHY LARKIN gripped the rail of the *Callidonia* and watched the Mississippi River ice heave and roil about the prow. It seemed he had been standing here in his California boots and leather jacket a lifetime, battering at this slow, evil flood. His callused hands ached, his great shoulders bowed as if he must push against each rising block of ice.

In this half light of a sunless morning the lack of wind made the whole windless stretch of encroaching banks more oppressive. Tim wondered if the noise and smell of the laboring engines wouldn't have been eased by a clean wind from the north, but that was something you certainly could not expect of this slow, treacherous river, coiling here between banks so wooded that no wind could get through.

The other men about the prow lolled and chaffed and spat tobacco juice over the rail. They laughed at the *Callidonia* for her chuffing, thumping effort. They had always thought she was

a quick-run boat, six days running time from N'Orleans to St. Louie, and here less than fifty miles above Memphis she slowed into the first wash of rotten ice. Not enough to stop any self-respecting steamer, but now the ice was so heavy she was pounding fit to burst a boiler and had made less than two miles an hour for the last three.

The slow, rocking ice threw jets of foam almost as brown as the tobacco juice the loafers spat, and with the eternal chuffing of the engines, uneasiness spread among the passengers.

The cheerful little captain with bulbous features stopped assuring people who questioned, and started scratching his thick gray hair with his two fingers as he lifted his cap.

"It ain't normal the ice should go out so soon. I 'lowed to have a channel, but no side-bodied break-up."

Timothy Larkin relaxed his grip on the rail and turned to face the captain. His skin above his short black beard was almost as brown as his leather jacket and straight-brimmed felt hat, but his eyes were startlingly blue and young for the weathered features.

"Do you aim to lay over in some b'yo'?" His voice was low pitched and soft, but there was a challenge in the words rather than a question.

"I got the safety of my passengers and cargo to say nothin' of my boat at stake." The captain put his cap firmly on his head and reared back on his heels to look into the face of the challenger.

"How long do you figger it will take for the ice to go down?"

"Five days—maybe ten, dependin' on where she started breakin'." There was nothing apologetic in his voice, for by now he had two boatmen behind him, either one as big as Timothy.

"We paid for passage on a fast boat."

"We sure did," a little dude of a fellow with pale skin and a waxed mustache put in. "What do you aim to do about that?"

Timothy looked down at the belligerent little man and was

reminded of a feist dog joining in a fight when he saw a bigger dog getting a sure advantage.

"Yes, what do you aim to do about it?" Another of the loungers came forward. He was even more fight-anxious than the little dude.

Tim looked about. If all of these deck passengers were going to stand back of him he wasn't so interested. They looked like a gang of cheap gamblers and river trash with just enough farmers and Irish immigrants who were deck-weary with delay to make a really dangerous fight.

Timothy Larkin felt ashamed of his backers, and of himself for starting something just because he was in such a sweat to get back home and away from this river that held such black secrets from him.

Suddenly he smiled at the captain. "I paid twelve dollars for this deck passage. I know you ain't too flush with grub. Will you lay me eight if I take myself off at the b'yo'?"

"How many of you want to leave?" The captain was still wrathful.

"Where the hell to?" The little dude made a sweep of his wispy arm toward the wooded banks, bare trees, and marshy thickets. "It'd be all a man's life was wo'th to git through that!"

"Some kind of a trace will open up once a body was on the bank. For years men have brought rafts and flatboats up this river by mule. There's got to be a trace." His voice had become so soft you could almost hear the Scotch roll of his r's that he had learned from Minerva.

The change had a magic effect on the captain.

"You're dead right, only the steamboat has about put bargain' out o' business. And if I'm any judge of ages, it was still when you was in short britches."

Tim laughed and straightened his heavy shoulders, and for the first time looked his twenty-five years. "I guess I been thinkin' of my pap till I figgered I was as old as him."

"On your way to visit him?" The captain acted as if there weren't an emergency for the boat and the passengers but as if he'd just cut out to ease into some good talk.

"No, he was lost on this river in the flood of '36." If Tim had been along and had seen his father go down for the last time he couldn't have sounded more positive.

"Lot o' good men lost that year. Ice broke up early because o' floods in Ohio—up ahead there to the left, men." The captain was suddenly commander of the boat. "It's a likely b'yo'. Wait till I get her bedded down and I'll tend to you."

Then with his voice lowered and natural he asked Tim his name before he went off to settle the boat.

"What's your all-fired hurry?" The little dude edged up to Tim. His pointed boots beside Tim's great oiled boots looked like shining perch beside river catfish in a market. The top of his head came between Tim's elbow and shoulder.

"I've got a long piece to go," Tim Larkin said, shifting his weight from one leg to the other without moving his feet.

"Not Californy?" There was eagerness in the little man's shrewd questioning.

"No."

"Ioway?"

"No." Larkin hitched his pants as though his pockets were heavy.

"Somebody ort to have him arrested for talking too much," one of the loafers said, nodding at Tim, but nobody laughed, maybe because everyone was too absorbed in the way the boat was edging in and out around the wedges of ice to a slippery yellow bank that led up to a woodyard.

But Timothy Larkin's eyes were not for the woodpile but for the moving object far down the bank. The other passengers followed his gaze. They started edging along the rail to get a better view.

In a few minutes the little dude said, "Be damned if it ain't a white mule. But what more could you expect of Arkansas?"

"How much you think it's worth?" Tim Larkin asked.

"Ten, maybe thi'ty dollars, but you ain't aimin' to ride it bareback."

"Could if I had to. What you bet I can't git that mule and saddle for forty dollars—if it ain't spavined."

"I'd have to have a better look before I'd lay a bet."

"Me too."

"I'm bettin' my money at this distance," Tim said. "Mule would be worth thirty dollars any day on a farm, even after a long ride."

"I'm not bettin'," the little dude said. "You just aimin' for our money to pay for your mule."

Larkin caught his breath and then eased it out as he saw the look of fear on the faces of the other passengers, as if they thought he might do the little runt some body harm.

"I'll lay you ten," one of the loafers edged forward.

"Bet's off." Tim strode down the deck to get a better view of the mule.

His legs were long for the rest of his lean body, maybe because of the stoop of his shoulders. In motion he gave an impression of unlimited endurance, his swinging legs seemed to saunter, until you saw that the little dude was all but running to keep up with him.

"He don't need no mule," one of the passengers said, "unless he's got a good-sized duffel to pack."

The deck passengers on the boat were more than interested, they seemed to drift toward Larkin like smoke toward a slow chimney. They were no longer interested in safe bedding of the boat but in the approaching mule and the lanky stranger.

"Where'd he come from?" somebody asked.

"Got on at N'Orleans. Reckon he ain't said half a dozen words since, till just now. Always watchin' the water, grippin' the rail like he'd break it if he got any madder."

The rider of the gray mule had come to the woodyard and

was waving at the passengers. He was an old man whose nose and beard almost met over his mouth.

"Hi' Sawyer! Wanna sell your mule?" a passenger yelled.

The Arkansan shouted back, "Looks like you're goin' ter need him."

"How much you take for that animule?"

"Got another one at home just like him, how 'bout buyin' the span?" the old man asked.

Tim Larkin had not opened his mouth.

"Man here wants to buy a mule."

"How much you offer?"

"Twenty dollars, if you throw in the saddle."

It was all a joking hail back and forth.

"Make it fo'ty and I'll gar'ntee he ain't winded or spavined, and less than ten year old." He patted the homemade saddle, a crude but comfortable looking seat with a piece of deer's antler by way of a horn.

"Let's see him trot."

The crowd at the rail turned to look at Larkin, who had at last spoken.

"Say, this mule's the easiest-ridin' animule this side Kentucky. He ain't no trottah, he paces." The old man gave a cluck, and with lifted ears and slanted tail the mule headed off down the bank to the end of the woodyard in an even pace that carried his rider as if he were in a carriage driven over smooth sand. With a circle to the right, he came back in a short lope.

"Be damned, if you'd cut off them ears, you'd think he had a saddle mare between his knees."

The old man took off his hat and waved it to the crowd and slapped the mule's neck. "Who'll make it fifty?" he yelled as he came as close to the boat as the slippery bank would allow.

"Good mule, not even pantin'." "Handles his feet well." "Mighty good hocks."

"Stranger," Tim Larkin's voice rose above the others, "I'll give you thirty-five for the mule and saddle."

"Make it fo'ty in gold and I'll sell."

"All right," Tim said.

"In gold?" The word went from mouth to mouth with increasing indignation. "Gold!"

It was as if the whole crowd was suddenly aware of having been taken in. This deck passenger with his worn clothes, his weathered hands, why he was probably fresh from California and toting gold enough to sink a body, and yet he'd come up like poor folks. Wouldn't even play cards—that poor! And now he was going to get away on a gray mule after he'd argued the captain out of eight dollars when he'd already come over half the way to St. Louis.

"And if you got a side o' bacon and a bag o' ground corn that's clean, with oats on the side for the mule, I'll make it forty-two fifty. But mind you, clean," Larkin ordered.

"Le's see the color o' your money," the old man yelled.

"Not till I've smelled your corn meal."

The captain came on deck just in time to be stopped by Tim for the eight dollars.

"I'm buyin' me a mule."

"There you are." The captain counted out eight silver dollars.

Tim Larkin had a smile on his face that rippled up to his blue eyes and made the short black beard look jaunty. "Thank you, sir. And will you vouch for me to the mule owner so's he can go get the grub?"

When Tim came back from the hold with his duffel bag and rifle there was a look of awe in the eyes of the crowd as a whole, if you didn't consider the ones who bore malice and shrewdness. These last made Tim glad to get rid of the lot of them.

He went up to the captain. "Here's my money for the mule and the saddle and the grub." Tim held out two double eagles which the captain took and turned in his knobby hands.

"Californy! There's been a mint o' money come back from there, but you're the last one I'd a thought packin' any."

"Because my pickin' was so slim, and boats is so high through the pass at Nicaragua."

"You could a told us many a tale," the captain said with real regret in his voice.

"And got a knife in my ribs for my trouble. Out there you learn to hold your tongue, and keep your trigger finger limber, as long as one breathin' man knows you got gold." Tim rubbed his beard with embarrassment; he'd talked too much.

"You say your name's Larkin?"

"Yes, Timothy Larkin."

"You ain't kin of the Larkins up around New Madrid, 'bout ten mile this side?" the captain asked. "Him and his boys sell wood on the boat line off and on when trappin' gets dull and they've a mind to."

"No," Tim said brusquely, thought better of it, and added, "not as I know of."

"Good thing, shiftless lot, can't be depended on for wood. Too easy grub to drop a line in the river or fire a ball in the woods. Yet, there's one thing about the old man—he likes good coffee and buys it off the steamboats. Good luck anyhow."

"Thank you, and I hope it won't be too long before this ice lets you off to St. Louie."

There was an awkward time while Larkin waited for the return of the mule, but a passenger in a new coat edged up to him and started asking questions about California and jotting answers on a paper.

"See much killin' there?"

"Enough!"

"Reports came through to St. Louie papers that they cut a man's ears off for stealing."

"Wouldn't doubt it, though more likely it should have read ear to ear."

The crowd laughed.

"Money easy?"

"No, unless maybe you'd like standin' knee deep in water

from sun up to sun down pannin' for gold, and then eatin' weevilly grub that cost half your wash for the day."

"You wouldn't advise an ambitious young man to go to California?"

"Not less he has money to invest in a grubhouse or outfitters' place, and if he had that much money he'd ort to just buy a piece of land in Missouri and start farmin'. Less work and certainer pay."

"People still pulling up stakes to go to California though."

"Because there's so many sellin' outfits and covered wagons, and them that come back is afraid to be caught tellin' the truth for fear home folks would think they got the little end of the horn. But there's my mule." Tim felt suddenly afraid he had made a fool of himself, talking so much.

He scrambled up the gangplank that slanted from the rail to the woodyard. Several other passengers had made use of the plank and were sitting and standing about the woodyard as if they'd come to an auction and were just waiting the fall of the hammer. They came one by one, crowding about the mule and his rider.

"This grub smells fresh, Grandpa," Tim said with a grin. "Looks like I'm gettin' a good mule and sweet grub. Here's your money."

Tim dropped the two gold pieces into the old man's hand and then counted out the silver piece by piece. The old man slipped the last into his pocket and balanced the double eagles in each cupped old hand as if weighing them out.

"Where'd they come from?"

"Californy."

"Say, captain," the old man called down to the boat, "Kin I come aboa'd till my boys come for me? I ain't aimin' to get bonked by one of these passengers before I get home with my gold."

Tim Larkin looked around at the strangers, hitched his trousers by the pockets, and climbed onto the mule. He put his

rifle across the homemade saddle horn, one finger on the trigger.

"Firearms is mighty handy," he said to the crowd in general, and because his other hand was busy with the reins he didn't take off his hat by way of farewell. He rode off slowly toward the first clump of trees to the north, drew rein and shouted back: "Hey, Grandpap, what's this critter's name?"

"Lonesome!" The old man shouted, "Lonesome!"

"And I'm apt to be mighty lonesome before I get to Clay County, Missouri, but we're headin' in the right direction." Timothy Larkin nudged the gray mule with his heel and proceeded to whistle a low monotonous tune through his teeth. He was glad the sun was getting out of that welter of dirty clouds.

Tim had eaten heartily for breakfast, so he planned to ride until his shadow had grown to its shortest and then back again to a size he could recognize as a companion before he'd stop for a midday meal. It must have been around eleven o'clock before he got away from the boat.

This was as good a mule as a man could want, and with grub on the side and all he'd need to cook with in the duffel, he was content enough. If he wasn't in such a hurry to get back to Clay County he might even stop around New Madrid to look up those Larkins. Might be some distant kin of Pap's that Ma would remember and like to hear about, but that would take time. As things stood he didn't know the distance, so he couldn't make any estimation of the time it would take to get home anyway.

This mule ought to be able to make at least twenty miles a day, and he knew there must be some kind of a trail that cut off northwest without going to St. Louis. If that ice went down tonight, he'd have been mighty foolish—for he could have made the trip from St. Louis by mule in less than twenty days. Though he wouldn't have this mule.

He laughed to himself and started humming the tune he had

been whistling. It sounded more like a bumblebee caught in a tangle than singing.

The trace was well marked and the path pretty well beaten, but Tim could tell that few tall men had ridden through here on tall mules, because the overhanging vines and branches kept a man everlastingly watchful. To the right the river, to the left the land, but canes had grown up on the river side until in many places he was out of sight of water. On the land side there were worlds of trees, cypress, oaks, a few evergreens, many willows and poplars and patch barked sycamores. In places the undergrowth was so thick Tim was almost tempted to hunt out a bear. Men from the boat might walk out this far and have good hunting while the boat was laid over.

Though goodness knows he'd seen little enough game—where was everything this morning? All he'd seen so far was that deer with ragged antlers, and it had been running toward him. Must have been a fox or wolf along the trail to scare all the little creatures out of the path. The ground would probably be bone hard with frost up in Clay County. Deer scarce, except around corn shocks—but down here—

Suddenly the bumbling stopped in his throat. There was something wrong somewhere. The freehearted aloneness that he had felt wasn't fitting.

He'd made a mistake not to have had some of his gold changed to silver in New Orleans. He'd even talked to that little newspaper writer about California—because he was so happy at the thought of action again instead of this unnatural boat travel. He'd exposed himself. And there had been plenty of time for some of them to get from that boat and hide out in this very woods.

No, he was just making up stuff to keep from feeling too lighthearted. He ran his hand around his waist under his coat and eased the weight of his belt.

Men had been killed for less. And on that boat there were many men that you couldn't trust as far as you could throw a

bull by the tail. And worst of all, he had bragged like a swaggering drunken fool.

Suddenly, as if his breakfast weren't sitting well on his stomach, he felt panic. Where was that little dudie feller when I rode off on this mule? He'd been close enough when the boat laid anchor, feistin' around under foot like a no-'count hound. Where was he when I got the truck from below? When the old man asked for protection? When all the talk about the trigger finger . . .

Cold sweat came under Tim's hatband. He could feel it along his spine where the money belt crossed.

"Lord A'mighty, to git this near home and have a little dried-up guy with a waxed mustache drop from a tree on the tail of my mule, or shoot from behind, or ambush like the Indians in Arpa Valley!"

Lonesome tracked right along without urging, as if he sensed this temporary but real-as-Christmas danger.

Two years getting this stake. No man alive could know how hard it had been if he hadn't gone through the troubles, and to lose it to a little dressed-up runt because he was sharper with his wits. *And about the gold!* Two hundred dollars that he owed to Polly's pap, and two hundred dollars to Harmony Blankinship from her husband, Blank, who never intended coming home at all.

But Tim knew Harmony wasn't like Polly. Harmony probably had a regular litter of young uns by now that didn't belong to Blank.

Tim remembered Harmony's laugh and her dimples and her way of talking on and on with nothing to say and yet making everybody laugh simply because of her good humor. Tim knew before he'd let his mind wander another step that all of this was merely another of those tricks you play on yourself to keep from thinking of something that scared the spit dry in your mouth, or like one of those lakes that was never there that he had seen in the desert.

He tried to tell himself that he'd seen that little fancy-footed runt down on the boat when he rode off on the mule. There had been plenty of people; surely the little dude was one of them. All this is just yaller janders in my mind because I ain't been in a woods alone for a couple of years.

The safest place a body could be was a good woods, day or night, if you had firearms. The real danger was in a crowd like the one on that Nicaraguan boat—foreigners and fever and a whole ocean where a person's body could be pitched over after it had been searched for valuables.

The roots of his hair prickled at the memory of that night: sailor's fire on the waves, he'd come for a walk around the deck, and he'd heard the ghostly sound, a dragging shuffling as if something were fluttering against the rail (he thought later of it being a belt buckle), and then the faint splash below after the soft thud against the side of the boat. From that night on he had slept with his gun across his chest so that he couldn't sleep too soundly. And he'd certainly never walked the decks after dark. Here he was in a good safe woods in Arkansas just a few miles south of Missouri and so covered with goose bumps that his clothes didn't fit.

He knew why he suspected the little dude more than any other man on the boat. It was because he'd caught the look in the little runt's eyes when he'd offered to pay for the mule in gold.

Tim pulled up his mule so he could listen. The saddle creaked at Lonesome's sigh. The vines and branches through which they had passed gave back into place with faint swishings and soft clatter of bare twigs.

The right thing to do would be to head Lonesome down the path at a gallop. In five minutes they could be out of reach of any man who had slipped ahead on foot. Outrun him, surprise him by speed.

And this wasn't imagination, Tim knew. He was as certain that there was active danger ahead as he was that his ma,

Minerva Larkin, was waiting for him up in Clay County. He'd heard his pap tell of the time he killed the rattlesnake because he suddenly felt the hair creep on the back of his neck, and anybody with a drop of Irish blood would know that was one certain way of knowing danger.

About fifty feet ahead, to the left of the path, an evergreen twitched. It was an unusual tree, not over ten feet high, with a thicket of growth from the ground up and a tangle of underbrush as far as he could see before the path bent off toward the river again. There wasn't wind enough to twitch that evergreen.

Quickly he slipped off his mule, ducked to the level of his rifle across the saddle. "If that's a cub bear, I'm goin' to feel mighty foolish," he said to himself, without taking his gaze off the short evergreen. The safest way would be to shoot straight into the tree, but he couldn't do that without giving warning. "Come out of that bush or I'm goin' to fire." If he could wing him on the gun side. Quickly Tim let his mind dart back to the boat. Yes, he had worn his gun on the right side, but that could mean anything, because some left handers drew from the right. To be afraid like this less than three miles from the boat was pure bilge!

He pulled the trigger and got behind Lonesome to reload. He was wasting his powder when he hurried this way to pour it in. There wasn't a sound from the tree as he could hear, no bird had flown, and no animal had shrieked or fallen. Now he knew it was a human he had to outwit. Slowly he edged Lonesome closer. The mule was restive and tossed his head and snorted.

The fool in the tree might even shoot the mule. Forty dollars!

"I don't have gold enough to be worth carryin' me on your conscience the rest of your life," Tim shouted. The sound of his voice was raucous in the quiet woods, it seemed to set up rustlings and flutterings at a distance, but nothing from the tree. "I'm not treecin' a possum, am I?" Tim caught himself

laughing nervously. He couldn't stand here all day waiting for some of the dude's friends to come up from the rear, now that they had heard the first shot.

"Get the hell out of that tree, or I'm comin' to get you." He fired again and reloaded before he slipped in front of the mule, crouching now so that the mule was against his back. With a quick cluck to Lonesome he dashed for the evergreen in its thicket of undergrowth. He might get a ball in his breast, but he wasn't going to expose his back to his enemy's friends. As he reached the tree he started pounding.

Nobody there. Not even a treed coon.

He hadn't dreamed that quick movement in that tree. He hadn't had one drink before leaving the boat, and he wasn't dizzy with fever.

He bent to look at the ground, making sure that Lonesome's head followed him down. And there it was, like a bright stone on a jewel peddler's black cloth, a drop of blood on the ground, and to the left of it the print of the toe of a man's boot, small and pointed.

Tim did not stop to study the ground. Time was more important than anything else at the moment, and by one glance he could see where a path had been made through the soft undergrowth. Now he knew who was ahead of him.

In a way it was a relief. He only wished he knew how many were behind him. The hair was no longer pricking the back of his neck because, now, he had his dander up.

If any of that boat riffraff gits this gold they've got to shoot me first, or maybe after they've got Lonesome. What in hell was I waitin' for after I saw that tree jerk? White-livered coward! If that damned little varmint outsmarts me! Me! After I've damned near killed myself to dig out this gold!

Those behind would pour up on him like ants over a cut bee tree. If he dared, he might mount his mule and make a break for it. But anybody who had ever heard of Absalom would hesitate. He wasn't afraid of getting hitched to an oak by his hair,

but those vines could crack his or Lonesome's neck mighty easy.

There was but one way: put Lonesome at his back, walk side-wise, and face the left. That way he could look both backward and forward. If they wanted to shoot the mule he'd have to leg it back to the boat—that is, if he got out alive.

His right arm ached from his trigger finger to his shoulder, but that was nothing to the ache in the left from the weight of the gun; his neck was stiff from the continual turning; his legs shook with the unnatural crouching gait he was forced to take to keep his head and shoulders out of range of rear and right gunfire.

He felt he'd gone hours in this position. Ahead he could see a slanting tree that almost crossed the path—blown down in some storm but held at a crossed-knee angle. The tree fascinated him, but he had to turn his head back to guard the rear. He couldn't stand much more of this; it was as if he were cracking down between his shoulder blades; and then for an instant he thought he was breaking to pieces when a pain hit him in the neck, but by then he had heard the shot and had seen the smoke not ten paces ahead in the slanting tree just this side of the crotch.

As best he could, he fired, but he was counting more on his speed to reach the tree before the dude could have time to reload. He knew he was praying when he said something that sounded like violent swearing. He didn't remember that he was unprotected from the rear, or that he had completely turned loose of Lonesome—he was after this man. He jumped for the overhanging tree and swung his leg over, only to get a violent crack on his shin.

No longer was Tim Larkin conscious of the pain in his neck. He was as violently mad as any man in a house who barks his bare shin against a pair of fire tongs or a trundle bed in the dark. His anger lifted him to the top side of the fallen trunk just in time to miss the little man, who fell out of the tree flat on his stomach and lay still, his pointed shoes toeing in.

Lonesome jumped and started towards home but was stopped short by a vine and stood still, as if tied.

Tim looked to loading his gun, because he feared all of this was a trick. Surely none of the others could have gone farther ahead, or could they? He turned quickly to get one of the limbs to his back and to feel the side of his neck, where there was a trickle of blood.

The little man on the ground had not moved.

"Hey, down there, where are your friends?" For the space of an eye wink Tim thought of shooting the little devil in the back—he deserved it for this bleeding neck. A body might better be shot dead from behind as die of blood poison off in the woods alone.

Tim dropped from the tree beside the little man. "Get up."

No answer.

This was too easy, there must be some foxing here. Although look as he would, Tim couldn't see signs of any companions.

He turned the little dude over with his foot. "I did wing you!"

"Umhum." He opened his eyes and squinted up into Tim's face an instant.

"Where are your friends?" Tim was stern.

"Wish to hell I had some."

"You mean you ain't one of a gang after me?"

"Jist me, and I'm dyin'." The little man made as if to fold his hands, but couldn't.

Tim bent and felt of his heart. "You ain't dyin', you're shot in the upper arm and have lost a little blood. Git up from there and help me build a fire and we'll burn out those wounds."

Tim took the little man's gun and hooked it over the highest limb he could reach without straining his own wounded neck too much.

"I ain't positive I believe you, but I'll rest against this tree with a bead on you, and if any of your friends are amind to come up shootin', you'll go first."

"Now Larkin, I swear I'm alone and I ain't able to fetch so much as a splinter of wood," he whined.

"Man, you want to die?"

"No, please, Larkin, don't shoot. Jist git on your mule and go on about your business and I'll go back to the boat."

"If you're strong enough to get back to the boat you can sure gether wood to burn out this hole you made in my neck."

The little man minced along and picked up two sticks before he fell over.

Tim jerked off his coat and started tearing at his sleeve. "The little varmit is bleedin' might' bad."

Tim hurried to the mule and unhooked one of the bridle reins; that would make a quicker band than trying to tear up a dress shirt. He made a loop above and below the wound. If he only had a quick fire he could burn out the wound before the little fellow got over his faint.

He took out his ramrod and laid it over the fire he was blowing into flame before he took off his own coat and shirt. Lucky to be so close to the river for water; boil it in the coffee pot; some coffee'd be good at the same time. No, still too close to the boat.

If they'd been listening two miles back they could have heard the dude's yell when Tim cauterized the bullet wound, but Tim made a good job of it.

"I ain't goin' to all this trouble for nothin'," he said, "so's you'll die just like I'd shot you in the back when you was flat on the ground. Lay back there and rest while I take care of myself. Lucky for me you was shootin' left-handed."

The dude grinned, "I aimed to shoot you from that cedar tree, but my foot slipped. Had a perfect bead on the center of your forehead."

"You'd ort to wear bigger shoes!" Tim gasped and swore to two deities and little fish hooks as the smell of burning flesh rose from his own neck. "But it wouldn't-a served anyhow, because I want to git home with this gold ten times worse than

you want it. I ain't afraid of dyin', no, I guess right now I'd sooner die than have to go home without this cash." And then, as if he suddenly realized he was sounding like a preacher or an abolitionist, he grinned and finished, "Besides, you didn't know I was half Irish."

Tim found the little man's name to be Burgess, and strangely enough it had often been prefaced with "Dude." He was easily forty-five, but Tim suspected that he would try to pass himself off for ten years younger. The black mustache looked too brightly black, and it drooped over his upper lip in a way to hide bad teeth.

"What you aimin' to do with me?" Burgess sat with his back to the tree and watched Tim repack the duffel. "You ain't goin' to leave me tied up out here to be eat up by b'ars?"

"Might be a good idea."

Tim carried his head at a stiff angle as he hurried with his work.

"I ain't strong enough to go back to the boat alone," he complained.

Silence.

"Your mule wouldn't carry double."

Silence except for the cinching of the straps.

The sun made shadows lean toward the east.

"You couldn't tie me behind the mule to walk, 'cause my boots ain't made for walkin'." Dude looked down at his pointed boots stuck out there at the end of his relaxed legs. He reached out with his left hand, on which he wore a coiling snake good luck ring, and cleaned a chunk of mud off the toe of his right boot. His right arm was tied in a sling made from the two sleeves of his white shirt.

"I'm damned, Larkin, if I can stand your silences. Why didn't you ride off on your mule when I fainted, stead o' torturin' me with suspenses, and maybe in the end takin' me off with you so's I have to grow a beard and look plumb uncivilized?"

"Be damned if I know, except that I ain't yet had to kill a man, and the first thing my ma is going to ask me is, 'how many men did you have to kill to get all this gold?' I don't want you to spoil my record."

"And deliver me from a saint. One of them come into my card room in N'Orleans—hadn't lost a cent either—but he took the place to pieces. That's why I'm ridin' the boats again. And then I meet up with you. Thinks I, 'Here's my chance to get me a new stake easy,' and I end up havin' you gouge in my arm like you thought it was a horse's hoof! And now I got to grow a beard!"

Tim laughed. He was glad to be so near home, where folks talked about horses instead of gold pockets. He knew you couldn't trust this little man any more than you could a weasel in a coop of young chickens, but he could make you laugh. The little guy's beard would probably come out salt-and-pepper gray, and sparse about the jaws.

"Know the river well?" Tim asked.

"Like my own pocket."

"What's the next three river stops?"

Burgess half closed his eyes and looked off in space. "New Madrid, Cairo, and Cape Geer'adeau."

"Ain't you forgettin' a few?"

Burgess thought again. "They's a couple of landin's or so, but they wouldn't be no place to leave so much as a turnip."

"I ain't aimin' to walk seventy or eighty mile, and it must be that much to New Madrid."

"Walk?"

"I don't aim to break down this mule."

"Larkin, if you ain't the borrowin'est trouble of a man I ever seen. Why don't you take me back to that boat, it ain't over two or three mile."

"And have all this to do over agin. Soon's half a dozen or more of them river cockroaches find that boat's layin' over a week or so, these woods is goin' to be full o' men huntin' for

gold, and some of 'em mounted. Come here and git on this mule."

"Honest, Larkin, I'm able to take keer o' myself, leave me be. If you don't trust me now, what you goin' to do in New Madrid, or sommers else up the line? I could tell the first feller we met that you was packin' gold, and he'd fetch you a bullet quicker than anybody from the boat could do it."

"I thought o' that already, but anybody that would shoot me for my gold would shoot you for the mule, or to keep from havin' to divide. I could gag you and tell everybody we met that you was a vile-speakin' horse thief."

"Now, Larkin. I swear I'll hold my tongue. I swear it."

"All right, git on this mule."

Burgess struggled to his feet and staggered toward the mule, his pointed boots toeing in dizzily.

Tim watched him. "It's a pity I don't let you get back to the boat the way you come. You could make it before sundown. Me and Lonesome could sure make better time without you. Sorry, I'll have to leave your gun out of reach, you might send out for it tomorrow, there's a dead fire to mark the spot."

Burgess' legs collapsed beneath him. "You got what the preacher called an original conscience, ain't you?"

"Wouldn't say that. It just happens to be more convenient."

No matter where he left Burgess, there would be the problem of pursuit. As Tim mounted the mule he remembered the old man's words that he had a second mule at home as good as the first. He urged Lonesome ahead. A short man on a fresh mule could make mighty good time after the path had been broken through these vines; might better have stayed in the boat and kept still about this gold.

This was the way he felt when he hit the dry prairies in the spring of '50 and found there wasn't grass enough to feed one hungry team of oxen, much less the fifty in the wagon train bound for California. But they had gone forward anyway. He'd gone as one of the guides to split his expenses, and had ridden

his own saddle mare that wasn't meant for prairie travel.

He leaned low over Lonesome's neck.

"Larkin." He heard his name shrill and plaintive. He wanted to go right on, but the second call stopped him.

"I can't walk! You've left me to perish."

Tim turned about, rode back to the little man, and swung off the mule. (He wondered if he would have been so quick to turn back on this merciful errand if it hadn't been for the thought of the other mule so close to the boat.) He reached Burgess' gun from the high limb, clicked the trigger to be sure it wasn't loaded, and stuck it, barrel down, into the soft mud; after being assured it was jammed he handed it to Burgess.

"Give me that ammunition belt," Tim ordered. This he threw into a tree. "If all of this is a trick, I'll wring your neck with my bare hands. I think you was just afraid to go back to the boat—you'd get laughed at."

Tim strode off leading the mule. Burgess huddled on the homemade saddle, his feet in the straps above the stirrups.

"Only a saint would ruin a purty gun like that," he whimpered as he tried to balance himself by hanging onto the deer's horn.

"It'll clean, but not *too* easy, and I ain't scared as long as you got one arm in a sling."

"The sweetest little woman in St. Louie is waitin' for that gun if she has forgot me. Jist itchin' for a ball in her white little breast. But I bet you're the kind of man some woman would cry her heart out waitin' for—no matter if you didn't have a red cent."

Suddenly, Tim Larkin was forgetting the tightness in his neck, where he'd seared the skin against the bullet wound, for the tightness in his chest at the remembrance of what he was going back to. Polly Ann and the boy and a piece of land big enough for a real start—no white-trash struggle on a swatch of ground, but a real stake, maybe a half section, and a house with a stairway, and maybe a couple of niggers to ease things

up for Polly Ann. No niggers in the field. No, they cost too much money, but Polly Ann should have what she was used to.

She'd cried when he first threatened to go to California for gold, but he knew she was glad to go back to her pa's to stay while he was away. Polly wasn't made of the same stout stuff as Ma, able to work from sun to sun and never know a minute of dogged weariness. But she had the spirit and she'd drop before she'd own up to bein' plumb done in. And she couldn't go back to her Pa's roof as long as her husband was around somewhere in the country, but with him off in search of gold she could take her baby and go home and be petted and waited on by every nigger in the cabins. It was good for Polly to go home.

Time and again Tim had told himself that, when he felt maybe he'd run out leaving her with the little Tim not much over a year old. How could he ever have got a stake for them unless he'd managed to dig it out of rock? Polly sure wasn't meant to be white trash, she was quality and delicate, not like Ma, though you had to admit Ma's very stoutness made her a special kind of quality. She'd never been beholden to anybody, and the way she had kept herself looking young waiting for her man all these years, hair as glossy as a young mare's flank, her walk so straight it shamed many a younger woman. All for Pa, who drowned in the flood of '36 or he'd sure have found Ma years ago.

And Tim set off thinking of his pa. He might have traveled this same road, this very path, even. Pa with his soot-black hair and beard, with a laugh fit to wake the dead, and a slow, lazy way of walking. Tim could remember how he'd waited at the bank of the Mississippi, hoping his pa would come. Little Timmy wouldn't be big enough to wait for him; he'd never even remember his pap if anything happened. Though he would still have his two uncles, Drew and Perry.

But Drew and Perry! Tim always shied away from them, though they were his brothers. Drew had wanted Polly too. He

told it the night before the wedding, when he'd drunk too much. He had said he had loved Polly since the time she took his hand and told him she was glad he'd come. What a fool trick! To tell a thing like that to be ashamed of for the rest of his life. So far nobody had told Drew what he had said. Yet everybody in the county might know it by now—that is, if Drew had got too talkative again. Probably as many people knew it as knew about the time Drew'd killed the sorrel gelding. Run him to death—and Drew the kindest man a person would ever know when he was sober.

That fine sorrel being skinned and buried by Tim and a sobered Drew made Tim afraid of drink.

If Drew had got Polly he'd never have drunk so hard. As for Ma, she never had admitted that Drew drank to excess. She'd never seen him ravin' drunk, though she'd put him to bed when he'd come home once in the bottom of the wagon, "just too petered out to put away his own team."

Tim knew that if anything happened to him Drew would see after Polly, and little Tim loved his Uncle Drew enough to cry for him. That came of Drew's always carrying a pocket full of candies. Tim knew Drew would make a better uncle than a stepfather. "What am I tryin' to argue myself into?"

Tim felt as if he were drawn ahead as surely as he was drawing Lonesome. He could easily walk ten miles from noon to sundown, and today he'd make it twelve, for there would be a moon. You could already see it in the daylight sky, more than a sliver, and on the make.

Two men and a mule were making good progress up the river, not because of the desire of the mule or the smaller man, but because of the furious push of the larger one.

Timothy Larkin began to feel he was a better walker than Lonesome, because in the last four days, except for brief periods when Burgess had been forced to walk because he'd grown troublesome, Tim had footed the same ground as the mule.

At night Burgess was tied in much the same manner as Lonesome, a sort of hobble for safety's sake. The fact that he had to share the blanket with Timothy certainly didn't add to the comfort of either, except that without a blanket the little man might have died of the "river damps."

Tim always built a big fire and kept it going all night for protection from animals as well as the elements, but he could do nothing about the increasing brightness of the moon that made him want to travel night and day, and would have if it hadn't been for the weakness of Burgess and the mule. Tim knew he could get enough rest snatched an hour or two here and there, but no mule could stand up to that.

"You might as well-a plugged me, Larkin, fer I'm goin' to die of this plaguey cookin' of yours," Burgess said the fourth night as he rubbed his stubbly chin as if to help work his jaw. "Them two or three squirrels we've had roasted wasn't too good, but better than this! Ain't you ever eat nothin' but side meat and corn bread?"

Tim, thinking of the big dinners served at the Arnett house, started naming mouth-watering dishes; ham baked with pickled peaches; suckling pig with onion stuffing; fried chicken; quail dumplings; green apple pie, still warm, drowned in yellow cream.

"Man, I'll die if you say another word. Half the stuff you named sounds poison, but that yellow cream reminds me of what coffee ort to be. If you'd not ruined my gun I might a got some birds to broil."

"Me bein' one."

"Larkin, you're the suspicionest feller I ever see."

"In another day or so you can have what you want. I'm aimin' to let you off around the landin'. You'll be able to get river grub. I hope you got money to pay for it."

"You don't mean you're lettin' me free?"

"I guess you forget it was you that hollered that I couldn't leave you be there in the woods."

"'Fess up, Larkin, that I been good company." The little gambler's eyes were bright with humor.

Tim had to confess to himself that the fresh windburned color that had come to Burgess' cheeks had made him look less an object of suspicion. There was something about a red-faced man that Tim liked better than one house-bleached.

"If you'd had a mule o' your own you wouldn't-a been so bad," Tim said. "Time and again it's been inconvenient to dodge houses and people, though the short cuts where the river curves had been obligin'."

"I'll bet you anythin' you want to name that you carry that gold sewed inside your pockets. I seen you hitchin' your pants often enough, and yet I ain't heard a rattle. Then again maybe in a belt around your waist."

Tim turned his head so quickly that the old wound on his neck twitched.

"That's it, I got you that time." Burgess' laugh sounded like a rooster's cackle.

He'd been trying to guess where Tim kept his money.

"And I bet plenty it's in twenties, because double eagles is the easiest carried! *And* changed!"

"Your guess is as good as the next redhaired Irishman's."

"I know this much, it ain't in the duffel bag, 'cause I've gone over every inch of it as we've rode through the woods."

"I knowed I'd better-a gone right on when you hollered for help," Tim said. He didn't mean it, for he felt so safe. He planned to ride past the next landing in the morning, and about four miles beyond put Burgess off. It would take him a couple of hours to get back into town, and by then, Tim, with good luck, could be ten miles to the north. There was still ice going down the river, so no boats had come up yet, and Burgess could make connections with the *Callidonia*.

They slept badly that night. "I shouldn't-a told you I was goin' to put you on your own tomorrow—makes you nervous as

a hummin'bird. Turn over there and go to sleep, or I'll put you out in the cold."

"Who could sleep with that moon blazin' light, much less with his coat on backwards and the sleeves anchored behind. Jist tonight, Larkin, let me have a good night's rest." Burgess begged. "I cain't even scratch my whiskers, and they itch like burs in your britches."

"I sure am sorry for you." Tim closed his eyes, but he kept wishing uneasily that he hadn't told Burgess he was letting him off. The way he had kept trying to find where the gold was carried and how much there was of it kept coming to Tim's mind to keep him awake. At the first break of light in the east, Tim got up and rebuilt the fire. While the bacon and corn bread were cooking, he trimmed and cleaned Lonesome's hooves.

"You're a good mule, and today we're really goin' to see if you can travel. You'll see a sight o' difference between me and Burgess. We've got a long piece to go."

Tim scratched at the base of Lonesome's ears and talked softly, "You ain't a beauty like my saddle mare, but you can stand up under strain." He was glad the old man at the boat hadn't been selling a fancy horse. He couldn't see fine horse-flesh go through strain. Now you take a mule, he was more like Polly's ma. You couldn't break Mrs. Arnett down, she'd go get on one of her new silk caps if she got tired, and fold her hands over a lace handkerchief just like a mule would balk if he got too tired.

"You're mighty slow this mornin'," Burgess complained sarcastically as he backed up to have Tim loosen his hands. "Slow as you are magnanimous! Magnanimous, I tells you, tyin' a man's sore arm behind him and makin' him git up right after the moon's finally set and they's dark to sleep by."

Tim laughed, but paid no attention to his words, saving his care for the wound on Burgess' arm. "Comin' along fine. Won't leave a scar bigger than a quarter. Might be bad holdin' a plow

in the ground or hacklin' hemp, but in your business it ain't goin' to hinder you a mite."

"I had my day of plowin'," Burgess said. "Brought up to work harder than any decent nigger, but I run off, just like slaves are doin' ever day."

Tim was surprised at the change in Burgess. He hadn't pictured him as one overworked, or as an abolitionist. He felt a sudden sympathy, of a kind, for the tricky dude, until all at once Burgess fell against Tim, his two arms went under Tim's coat around his waist, his fingers clutched onto the money belt.

"Hey!" Tim quickly righted Burgess, and now his voice was hard. "Don't tell me you're gettin' faint again."

"Bein' hungry allus makes me dizzy. My stomach is allus kind of queezy in the mornin's, especially if I smell fryin' bacon and wood smoke and burnt corn bread and mule hooves and the fishy old Mississippi." He staggered on his narrow boots over beside the fire and sat down weakly.

Tim stirred up the fire to make a bright light. Burgess was not pale; his beard left shadows on his chin and jaws, but his cheeks were warm with color. Tim knew then that he would go off and leave him right where he sat. The next landing couldn't be over five miles away.

"It's funny how even a few mouthfuls of bad grub will settle a body's stomach."

"Yes, it is eternal funny."

Tim bolted his food and started packing his truck. He saddled Lonesome and strapped on the duffel.

"This is the earliest we've started out yet." Burgess was stretching as he kicked out the fire. The sun was just showing a rim through the trees across the river.

"Earliest I've started out yet," Tim corrected. "It can't be too far to a landin' of some kind, and I guess you can about make that for yourself."

Tim swung up on Lonesome and threw Burgess' muddy gun to the ground. "You're on your own now."

"Why you——" and for an instant Burgess was so astonished that he couldn't even swear, though he made up for it as Tim rode Lonesome off at a good clip. The swearing followed even after the little man stopped running to catch up.

The trail was well cleared ahead, and Tim urged Lonesome into a gallop. However, he couldn't go far at this gait, as the sandy loam of the road had been rutted by wagon wheels, and it was hard to hold the mule to the middle.

Even his delay along this distance could not spoil Tim's sudden sense of freedom at being rid of Burgess, and a consciousness that twenty-five was after all young! Why, he had fifty years before him, and he shouldn't worry about having wasted four days by toting along that gambler because he'd shot him in the arm and had to be sure he wouldn't die.

He whipped up the mule, only to be halted by a pack of hounds that barked in front of him until Lonesome stopped with a jerk. For an instant Tim was afraid. He'd no idea what or who might come out of the brush behind those hounds. It might be a bunch of runaway Negroes desperate for a mule, or white men after a Negro. He wouldn't dare wait to find out. Without further thought he unstrapped the last of his bacon and threw it to the hounds. With yips and snarls they fell upon the offering, and Tim kicked Lonesome in the flanks.

This mule could travel smartly enough once given a start. Tim's heart slowed to normal when he was out of hearing of the dogs.

Now he saw the house in time to slow Lonesome to a quiet walk, and in this way kept from rousing the watchdogs. It was a sagging log cabin beside a barn even more bowed down, but there were two horses in the lot and a brindled cow, and off back of the house you could see a clearing where corn and cotton had grown.

Tim almost wanted to pull up and talk to the farmer. That man had grown corn, and he'd cut off the trees to clear the

land; besides maybe the man could tell him how to get to the road that led off northwest catty corner through the state. At the next house he would ask; this was still too close to the hounds.

It was along about nine o'clock that he stopped at a landing to buy some bacon and coffee. He asked the way to the road he was hunting and the name of the next landing.

"Hit's a good piece to the next real landin', that's New Madrid, but only about ten, twelve mile or so to a woodlot run by a man name of Larkin, but you won't be passin' there because you turn off to the west about a quarter or so this side. There's hardly a road into the landin' anyhow; the Larkins ain't much on keepin' up the road, they're more for river trade."

Tim paid for his supplies with silver and bought himself some tobacco, home-grown and in a spun-cotton bag. He felt cheerful and easy in mind. He wanted to sit down and talk with the man but forced himself to go on. He wanted to warn the storekeeper of the gambler in tight boots who would be coming in sometime before evening but decided he wouldn't make it any harder for Burgess.

The man wished him on his way with a "Hurry back, stranger."

"Nice folks down here," Tim thought, "and I'll bet that ground's so rich you could drop a flax seed and it'd come up spun linen, once you got the trees cleared out."

For a mile or two he passed clearings where people had broken out farms and grown cotton and corn. The very sight of the withered corn leaves, rattling brown, made Tim urge on his mule. These people down here were lucky, probably sold off all their wood to steamboats instead of burning it in ricks the way they sometimes had to up in north Missouri.

Polly probably wouldn't want to leave her folks to come down here, but it surely would be a good place to live. Here in the beginning of February things already turning green,

collards and onions and turnip tops behind the houses, and lots of vines and bushes that would be bare as a gnawed bone up home. It might not be a bad idea to take Polly and the young one clear away from her family, yes, and his ma too. Pa did that when he married Ma; took her from Pennsylvania to Ohio. Polly depended a lot on her folks, and it was harder for her to see them so often and realize her little sister was waited on hand and foot by the slaves. Old man Arnett had wanted to give Polly a couple of slaves when she married, and if Tim had owned a house of his own he could have taken them along, a man and his wife, but Ma wouldn't have slave labor on her place, no, not even if she knew that Polly needed more care and less work.

Tim stopped to eat his dinner beside a spring that was in throwing distance of a fine patch of native hay for Lonesome. There wasn't any special hurry now, so he decided to stretch out on the ground for a nap. He felt safer than he had felt for the whole first four days, with Burgess on his mind, though of course he did put his rifle under his left shoulder, which was more from habit than caution. With Lonesome's hobble rope tied to his arm, his hat over his eyes, he fell asleep to the rhythmic sound of the mule's munching.

He was wakened by a sudden bray, and an awkward jerk on his arm. He jumped to his feet and raised his gun. His first thought was of a timber wolf or even a bobcat after his grub, but it didn't take more than a second for him to see that he was practically surrounded by men with guns leveled. Their horses formed a stout blockade down the trail.

"Might as well come willin'." It was the man who had sold Tim the provisions and tobacco. "No wonder you was so free of money."

Tim didn't put down his gun. His eyes slowly took in the circle and there, edged mostly behind the speaker, was Burgess

with a white bandage about his head. "I sure figgered I should of killed you."

"See!" Burgess danced up and down in his fancy boots. "And he about did when he bashed me with the butt end of his gun to knock me out. It was mighty lucky some men come by from a coon hunt and found me strugglin' up the road."

The hounds Tim had thrown the meat to must have been with these merciful men! If he hadn't been so white-livered he'd have seen those men first, and then they wouldn't have believed Burgess' trumped up story. Tim had never thought ahead this far, and so he was as dumb of speech as a yearling before a butcher. He could have imagined someone shooting him in the back for his gold, but to have it stripped off him by a posse and a lying little gambler was completely out of his comprehension.

"So you thought because this was a sparse settled piece o' country you could half kill a man and be off with his mule and gold scot free."

Tim realized now that there were seven men besides Burgess with guns drawn on him. "Jist to look at the two of us which would you figger was the biggest liar?" Tim asked it slow and soft to keep the quiver out of his voice.

"We ain't got time to figger. Hand over that gold, or we'll string you up and take it off'n you."

These must be men who had never seen professional gamblers. Tim looked them over slowly. They were honest farmers and probably couldn't imagine such lies any more than he could.

"Did Burgess tell you he shot me, and I shot him three four days ago?"

"Listen at him! He comes up on me last night, walkin' with them long legs o' his, fair to keep up with my mule." Burgess begins, "Thinks I, 'he looks lonesome and hungry,' so I asks him to eat a round o' victuals with me."

His voice was high and determined, with a soft sympathetic note when he came to the lonesome and hungry part.

The seven men moved in one more step.

"It was while we was eatin' that he done it, quick as that he was." Burgess snapped his fingers, making the lucky snake ring glisten.

"When I come to, it was dark, I was layin' by the dead camp-fire with my gold gone along o' my mule."

In all California and the six months getting there and the two months getting back, Tim had never been in a closer place. He could feel the rope tighten about his neck, scruff over the old bullet wound, and hear the jerking of his own boots against each other as he spun from the end of a rope.

Tim swallowed hard. "Ask him how he carried his gold, and was his clothes wet from river damp from sleepin' without a blanket?" Tim's voice sounded weak to himself, he was suddenly saying every prayer he could remember. "And look at his hands and see if he's ever put them to diggin' gold." Tim held his gun under his arm and showed his water-weathered hands.

"Nobody said I dug it. I got that gold in payment for three fine niggers I sold down in Memphis to work in a rice field."

Tim wanted to drop open his mouth and just listen to the little gambler's imagination, but time was too short. He hitched his breeches and felt again the easing of the weight around his waist, and with ease came an idea.

"I can see you farmers have been pulled in by a quick tongue, and if I hadn't been listenin' to that little feller's lies for four days I couldn't believe what I'm hearin'. You men wouldn't want to hang me and start lookin' for my gold and find I'd had it so long that it's wore calluses on my hide, would you?"

Tim was pleading for his life; the men were two steps closer. Tim laid his gun on the ground. "Just to show your good intentions, will you ask Burgess there how he carried his money? And exactly how much there was of it?"

"It's a trick, it's a trick," Burgess screamed. "He got his voice soft that way tellin' me he was goin' back to his wife and little

boy somewheres up north just before he lammed me with his gun."

"First off—take off Burgess' coat and you'll find he's got no sleeves in his shirt, unless he stopped somewhere and got a new one." Tim had never talked so fast. "I tore them sleeves out to make a sling for his arm after I shot him." Tim reached up and pulled open his own collar and exposed the scar on the side of his neck. "That's where he shot me."

"Oh, he's lyin'. I never wear sleeves in my shirts, cuffs too-quick dirtied."

"Men aire we goin' to stan' here tell sun down argyin'? I aim to get me a deer before night, my old womarn says we're plumb out of meat," one of the men grumbled.

"All right, ask him how he carried his gold—what's the mint mark?" Tim had to shout to make himself heard. He thought of his pap coming up through this same country sixteen years ago, and he suddenly hoped he did drown in the flood instead of being swung from a limb for some little sunsagun.

The men were all arguing about why they had to be home early, until the storekeeper held up his hand.

"How many of you men can tell the mint mark of the money you're carryin'," Burgess yelled.

The men started laughing at this, turning out their pockets to show their lack of coins.

"Besides, he could have dipped into my gold so that I couldn't begin to tell the amount left."

"He's right!"

"No, he's not! Because *I* know the mint mark; I carried the dust to the mint myself; it's all the same," Tim said steadily. "Do you think it likely he'd have been paid in gold with the same date and mark? Besides, I've wore this money till it's left a mark on me."

Tim started shucking out of his coat. "Don't have me on your conscience the rest o' your life—I don't ask any more than a fair chance." For a tense moment Tim held his breath be-

cause the man with the rope was inching it through his fingers. "All I ask is a chance—fair."

"Hit won't take long," the storekeeper said. "Keep a bead on him, boys. How much money did you lose? And how was you carryin' it?"

"Over two thousand dollars, and all in twenty-dollar gold pieces in a money belt around my waist," Burgess said.

Tim could feel Burgess' fingers clutching at his belt as this morning when he pretended to faint. He could have discovered the size of the coins then.

"That'd be around eight pounds," Tim said, "and it would take a powerful money belt. The belt I'm wearin' holds a lot less than that, and if you can find marks where it has held more except two twenties that I paid for this mule, I'll make the slip knot myself. But this belt o' mine has got me callused. If Burgess had wore that belt even from Memphis he'd have welts on his belly."

"I tell you he's tricky," Burgess said. "He's filched money from my belt and he's goin' to talk you into cheatin' an hones' man out of his rights."

"I think we'd ort to look at both men's bare middles," the man holding the rope said stubbornly, "right now nothin' would pleasure me more than to string 'em both up, 'cause they talk too damned much."

"That's what I think," the storekeeper said, "but it won't take long to look at their hides."

"You're not goin' to undress me out here. It's not decent," Burgess tried to sound noble.

"The scar on his arm," Tim said, beginning to feel safer, "is about the size of a fifty cent piece, and is jagged around the edge because I burnt it out. It's about the span of his hand above his right elbow."

Tim pulled off his shirt without unfastening his trousers. It swung down from his belt, showing a worn red welt and the top of a leather belt under his shirt, fastened with a leather loop.

"Skin off that coat and shirt," the storekeeper demanded of Burgess.

Two of the men yanked off the little man's coat and exclaimed when they saw the right-arm wound.

"I tell you it's a trick. That Larkin feller saw this wound when I took off my coat last night to ease my arm a bit."

"It could be," the grocer said to the man who handled the rope and was pressing forward. "Take off his shirt. Hit's six days from Memphis, and that money belt might even have left a blister or two."

It took two men to hold Burgess while they peeled off his shirt to expose a middle as white and uncallused as a grubworm in spring.

PART II

February 1852

TIMOTHY reached the crossroads before he made up his mind. When he looked off toward the west and realized there were mountains and valleys and rivers to cross, he knew his insides just weren't up to it yet.

"What one day's rest would do for me and one night's sleep in a house with maybe some women-cooked victuals! These Larkins may be some kin o' Pap's anyhow. And if Burgess gets out of that mess down here he's goin' to be hot on my trail."

To give him the slip would be worth laying over a day or two. He wouldn't need to tell the Larkins his right name, in case they'd heard of the doings of the posse. He didn't want them to be after his gold too, and goodness knows just because their name was Larkin didn't make them any more honest than Burgess. Ten or twelve miles was quite a piece for news to travel, especially if the road into the Larkin's Landing wasn't much used. The ice on the slow river would still keep word from beating him there that way.

Tim was so tired he felt he could sleep a week, his legs ached as though the malaria had got into his bones, and Lonesome was pulling his feet like some good old Clay County yellow clay had balled up on him. The sun was warm on Tim's back, and he wanted to droop forward on his mule's neck and just give up for a while.

The terror that had seized him after the posse turned him loose was ten times worse than that which he had felt while their guns were leveled at him.

He was mortally thankful the men had been honest farmers or he would have been in more danger than ever after he showed them the belt and the identical mint mark and the place in the belt where the two twenties for Lonesome had left their impression. The men even offered to give him safe conduct out of the county, but Tim thanked them and just asked that they hold onto Burgess until next morning.

When the men were together they were safe, but there might be one in the crowd who would join with Burgess for a consideration, and they all knew he, Larkin, planned to head out northwest. Nobody but the grocer would know about having told him of the Larkins.

Tim held Lonesome to the trace and passed up the turnoff to the left. He'd go to Larkin's landing. He soon found he'd have to walk to get through the thickets with his hat on.

All at once he was explaining to Ma and Polly why he'd delayed, and laughed right out. Days there had been when he didn't even think of them, but here, that he was on the last leg of his journey, he felt practically home already.

He started humming to himself, and that was probably the reason he didn't hear her coming through the woods and was as surprised as Lonesome when she stood there before them as they rounded the bend. Tim didn't take off his hat, he didn't even speak, he just stood there holding Lonesome's bridle, for he wasn't sure that his worn-out body hadn't somehow made his mind start seeing things.

The light slanted down through bare branches and made bangles of gold all over her. Tim had the feeling she would look shining and rare in a cellar lit by one tallow dip. Her hair and skin and lashes looked as if they'd been powdered with gold dust, and even her eyes were an amberish gold. Of course he knew the whole girl was just a dream because he'd had gold on his mind for so long. For months he had seen no women except whores and immigrants who were half-starved and homesick.

No real woman could stand there as if the air held her up. Yet, there certainly was nothing wispy about this woman. She was taller than average, with a smooth round neck that held her head as if it was no weight at all.

He took off his hat and fanned it before his eyes.

The girl opened her mouth and laughed in his face but did not disappear. "You don't have to speak, jist git out o' the road and let me by."

"Excuse me, miss, I guess you kind of took me by surprise." Tim could feel his face hot above his beard, and all at once wished he was smooth-shaven.

"Did I now?" She laughed again, and this time a dimple entirely out of place appeared high on her cheek, as if she had been too perfect and some witch had determined to flaw her and had only succeeded in making her more tantalizing.

Tim wanted to say something to make her laugh again so that he could be sure this strange dimple hadn't been a trick of some shadow, but for the life of him he couldn't make his tongue clatter with smartness the way Burgess could.

"You didn't see a roan cow as you come along, did you?" she asked soberly.

"I sure did."

"Where?" She sounded accusing, maybe as if he had planned to steal the cow.

Tim grinned at her. "Early this mornin' about twenty mile back. Would that be your cow?"

"Did she have one horn curved a leetle might more than the other?" Her amber eyes were merrier than good whisky on a cold night.

"Now, I couldn't tell for sure that it did."

"You mean she was headed other end to."

Tim had completely forgotten that women could be so full of fun and mischief. She didn't lower her eyes but looked straight at him, as if her eyes could talk to his. It was a new fascination. He chuckled and broke the spell.

"You're sure your cow went this way?" Tim took his look away from her long enough to examine the ground for cow tracks in the path, and as much to see if she stood on two feet. Yes, she did, ample feet in homemade shoes (more like those that Indians wore than civilized footgear). And her plaid cotton skirt was a good eight inches from the ground so you could see her ankles stemming down. He suddenly remembered why he had stooped. "To my mind, there ain't been a cow this way in three or four days."

Then made bold by the sound of his own voice as a hunter sometimes by the sound of his powder, "You'd might as well turn around and go back. You could ride my mule."

"Many thanks." She hesitated, turned to look behind her, then accepted his offer.

At once Tim realized he couldn't look at her if she rode the mule, and felt a sting for his generosity. "Though of course you're apt to get vines caught in your hair like Absalom."

Why didn't she have on a bonnet? Or a shawl tied around her head? She was wearing some kind of a jacket that buttoned across at her waist and showed off her figure better than any shawl could have done. And he could see her feet and ankles without having to hoist her up on a mule like some fool school boy.

"Ma'd like you," she said with another laugh that sent the strange dimple skittering on her cheek. "You know the Bible."

"Oh, everybody knows about Absalom."

"I can duck the branches. It ain't ever day I can ride a gray mule. What's his name?"

"Lonesome, bought him off a man in Arkansas."

"My, you've rid him quite a piece."

Tim knew he should have said, "But not a fourth as far as I've got to ride him," but instead he asked her if this was the way to the Larkin's Landing.

"You goin' there?"

"I aimed to ask them for a night's lodgin'."

"Then I guess I won't mount up on the mule," she said with a sigh of disappointment, "I turn off this side. But you'll shore find plenty to eat at Larkins' tonight. They've jist kilt a hog."

"But your cow? Ortn't you go on toward Larkins'? Maybe she went that way?"

"No, I come from that way, but if you do find her wanderin' aroun' you might bring her to the house just off the south b'yo'. You couldn't miss it. My pap keeps a pack o' hounds."

She was walking beside him down the path; her head came well above his shoulder, and she swung along so easy he matched his step to hers without mincing.

"Tell the Larkins you saw Lovie Romines as you come up the trace."

"They friends o' yours?"

"In a way o' speakin'. But here's where I turn off. Larkins' is less than a half a quarter straight ahead. If you sniff right strong you can smell the smoke from their farr. Old Lark has probably gone in the house and made the boys build up a big one. He was settin' in the sun when I come by."

Tim wanted to tell her his name; she'd told him hers; but she didn't give him time, and besides he'd made up his mind to keep the Larkin silent. He'd just say Timothy Taylor and leave off the last name.

He could smell the smoke from the Larkins' fire and in a few more paces see it coiling slow and straight up into the clear blue sky. It must be about four o'clock by sun, and be-

ginning to get chilly. He'd be glad to sleep inside walls tonight, to smell again the warmth of a house and see women bending over a hearth.

All at once he knew the woman he was seeing bend over a hearth. She wasn't small and close-knit like Polly with a high, cool forehead and a pointed chin—but she was tall with yellow hair that coiled like new-spun flax at the base of her firm round neck. And the firelight shown on her face and golden throat and you knew how she would look if all the buttons suddenly dropped off her clothes and let them circle down at her feet.

For an instant Timothy Larkin stopped in the road—"Tomorrow I'll take out for Clay County before sunup."

Tim called out from the Larkins' hitching post. He guessed the hounds must be too full from the butchering to make his coming known.

The house was made of split logs and stood on four-foot stilts that looked as if they were sawed-off trees, and maybe that accounted for one end being wider than the other. At one corner of the house the tree had sent up shoots that came almost to the roof.

No wonder the steamboat captain had called these Larkins a slovenly lot. But Tim had to laugh at their evident good sense in saving work. Suppose all four stilts started growing and just raised the place completely off its balance. This was queer country all right—women that walked through the woods as natural as young does and houses that looked like they'd been planted in the light of the moon.

The door opened and a black-haired boy about twelve or fourteen yelled, "Howdy."

"Is this where the Larkins live?"

"Yes sir."

"Ask your folks could I stay the night. My mule's goin' lame."

The door shut, and when it opened again Tim was astonished to see a graybearded giant of a man.

"Tie up and come in," he shouted. "One of the boys will unsaddle your mule."

Tim hated to leave Lonesome, now that he had a chance. How did he know what kind of a den he was getting into? He rightly should have gone with the girl. Suppose he never saw her again—Lovie Romines, Lovie Romines, no name at all for a woman.

Slowly he tied the mule. He left the duffel bag but took his rifle up to the cabin, where he set it beside the door.

"We're just gettin' ready to eat. Killed a hog today," the old man said in a deep vibrant voice. "All mighty hungry. My name's Larkin."

Tim remembered to say Timothy Taylor.

There was a good smell of crackling bread on the hearth and frying heart and liver with onions. Tim had never cared for fried liver, but tonight he thought he couldn't wait until the woman bending over the fire should take up the victuals and bring them to the table.

The room seemed full, and not too light, except over by the fireplace. As his eyes grew accustomed to the gloom he recognized the boy who had first come to the door, or was it the other one? There were two so much alike that you would have had to stand them up against a mark on the wall to tell which was the taller. Under the table, playing with a blown-up pig bladder, was a blond baby that looked to be somewhere between one and two years old. He was holding the bladder in one hand and trying to pinch it with the other so that it made a strange squeaking sound, not very different from the original pig.

Tim felt his throat clog up. That baby was about the size of his little Timmy. No, Timmy would be two years older than this baby. Talk in some sense. When he meant to ride on his pap's back he wouldn't have to holler "backy-back."

"Emmie," the graybearded one called, "here's company."

Tim watched the back of the woman as she straightened from the frying skillet. She had a knob of hair on the back of her

head like new-spun flax that had maybe yellowed in the bleach. And when she turned, Tim almost gasped.

"Howdy," she said.

(Even in Lovie Romines' voice. Her back to the firelight made her look as if she had a halo around her head when the light shone through her hair. Her skin was golden too.)

"Good time fer company, when they's plenty o' victuals already cookin'."

"Thank you, ma'm." Tim didn't know whether to call her "ma'm" or "miss," but that blond baby must be hers. Surely she couldn't be old Larkin's wife. Yet men sometimes took younger women to wife on a second marriage. Her dress dropped straight from her shoulders like some kind of a sack. She might even be with child now.

"Emmie, you lost your belt again," one of the boys called from behind the table. "I knowed that peddler was a cheater when he sold you that fancy buckled belt—it don't hold."

The boy held up a red leather belt with a tongue and eye hook.

"Give it to me, Romie."

She was blushing clear down her neck. She put the belt on and reefed in her straight dress till she had a trim middle. She fastened the buckle and then tore a piece of bark off one of the sticks of firewood and in some way anchored the belt.

"I wouldn't put it past you to of drug it off me when I was bendin' down." She reached over and shook the boy's head by tangling her fingers in his black hair.

All of them laughed.

The baby under the table echoed the laughter.

The boy explained to Tim under cover of the confusion, "Emmie puked when Pap stuck the hog, and we've been teasin' her about biggin' up again."

"Git up to the table, everthin's ready," Emmie ordered.

It didn't take much moving of chairs—the bench at the back of the table was for the boys. The old man brought his split-

hickory chair over and sat down in it. Emmie brought the other split-hickory chair for Tim and turned the dasher-churn without the dasher around for herself. Tim thought he should offer to sit on it (if Emmie had been Polly she'd have expected it of him), but he sat in the comfortable hickory chair and watched her balance herself on the churn.

The surrounding of the table by legs must have been a signal for the baby to set up a howl.

"Romie, get Boy from under the table and let him eat there by you."

"Hey, Boy—here to Romie."

Romie stuck his head under the table and presently came up holding a tear-wet, grinning baby.

"Howdy, Boy," Emmie bobbed to the baby until Tim was afraid she'd fall off the churn.

The old man filled his plate from the surrounding dishes and started eating without passing anything to Tim or waiting for him to be served by Emmie.

But Emmie covered it up without acting conscious that the old man in any way had been short of hospitality. "He wouldn't eat nothin' till we was plumb through with the work, and he's mighty particular about hog killin' and curin' the hams. That's the way he always is when he does work; flyin' chips couldn't catch him. Have some cracklin' bread, and some liver and some of these turnip-top greens."

She looked gay and talk-hungry.

"Have you been a fur piece?"

"From Arkansas on this mule."

"My oh my, that is a piece! Lark here, though, went to N'Orleens on a boat onct."

Tim thought how he could make her eyes shine if he only started telling her where he'd been. But he wanted her to talk and get things straightened out. He'd heard that in certain backwoods localities all the people got to looking alike because of intermarriages.

"He planned to be gone jist a couple of weeks, Lark did when he went to N'Orleans, but Romie was jist a baby, and he'd cut both stomach teeth before his pap got back."

She laughed like a child, free and high.

The old man ate on as if he couldn't chew and hear at the same time.

"I ain't never been farther than New Madrid. Pa took us children to see a show the steamboat advertised. I guess I was about the size of Romie. I liked it, but Lovie cried because Pap wouldn't get her a skirt with wire around it like the show women had."

Lovie! Tim felt his breath so tight in his lungs he couldn't swallow past it and got choked on a hunk of liver.

"But Lovie always was such a young un."

Tim wondered how much older this sister was than Lovie, and all at once he knew that Emmie must be the old man's wife, and then he wanted to ask if Lovie were married too.

There was a sudden scraping of a chair, and Tim saw the old man get up and leave the table. His shadow folded up the wall to cross the ceiling as he went to the fireplace and pulled out a live coal to light his pipe.

"Smoke?" he asked Tim.

"Yes."

"Terbaccer in that noggin on the mantel. Help yourself."

"That's mighty generous of you," Tim said. He looked down at his plate and realized he wasn't through eating.

The old man came back to the table and sat there smoking with impatience, as if he had scruples of some kind against disturbing a man's eating by confusing talk.

Tim hurried. He wanted another helping of the turnip greens, but pushed his plate back and got out his pipe and followed the old man's lead.

"Say you've been to Arkansas?"

"Yes, sir."

"How fur down had the ice got?"

"I saw the *Callidonia* bedded down in a b'yo' long 'bout five days back."

Emmie laughed. "Lark here don't care about the boat; all that's botherin' him is he's wantin' some coffee."

"I been to Arkansas," Larkin said to Tim, ignoring Emmie. "Swamps thicker'n around here. I wouldn't clear out a place down there if you'd give it to me with a stake and rider fence around it. No sir, and paid me twenty dollars in gold every year."

Tim wondered how Arkansas could be any worse than the swamps around here, where cypress trees sent knees up through the mire to aggravate man and beast.

"Say, ain't you boys filled up yet? 'This man's mule is goin' to perish at the post while you young bucks bust your guts eatin'."

"I been havin' to feed Boy here," Romie complained.

Boy looked to have been slathered with eatables, mostly turnip greens. If he had swallowed half as much as he had on the outside, he ought to have been pretty well filled.

Without an exchange of words Emmie and Romie, carrying along their plates, changed places. Boy stood on the bench and patted the once whitewashed walls and babbled to himself.

So the baby was Emmie's, and Emmie was Lovie's sister.

"You wa'n't thinkin' of settlin' in this part the country, was you?"

"Hadn't give it much thought."

"They's good land to be had aroun' here for nigh to nothin'. Two farms up north about three mile—one already got a house and ten acres cleared."

"How much?" Tim didn't know what made him ask instead of saying, "I'm gettin' land up in Clay County, where I got a wife and boy."

"Probably ten dollar an acre for that that's cleared, and as low as seventy-five cents for the rest. A couple or three hundred dollars would set a man up in fine shape."

"How many acres do you have here?"

"Oh, I don't 'low to farm. Me an' the boys log some an' trap a little an' maybe raise us a couple o' hogs a year, but you're upstandin' young, and you'd ort to be thinkin' of the future. They's them that sells cotton off these patches and makes money hand over fist."

"Wouldn't you need some niggers to raise cotton?" Tim recalled he hadn't seen one colored person since he left the boat.

"Not in these parts; raise you up a passel o' young uns an' you'd have the hands you need."

Tim should have said what he'd always thought: No young one of his was ever going to work as hard as he'd worked as a boy, but instead he asked if the old man ever grew cotton.

"A patch. Jist enough for Old Lady Romines to card and weave into coverin' for my family. I guess," he stroked his gray beard and looked sidewise at Emmie, "I guess when the old lady gives out, me and my family will go around nekked as young blue jays."

"You knowed I couldn't weave when you took me," Emmie giggled. "They'll allus be yard goods at New Madrid if you got the money to pay fer it."

So that was settled. Emmie was Mrs. Larkin.

"I thought you'd learn; you wasn't too old," the old man said. "If it hadn't been for Lovie you would have too."

Romie and the other boy left the table and went outside, but Romie stuck his head back in to ask what he should do with the duffel; there might be varmits after it in the barn.

"Bring the saddle and duffel and all in here and peg it on the wall," the old man ordered.

Tim noticed that Boy had gone to sleep in Emmie's lap, and Emmie, blond and almost delicate, looked as if she could topple over on the bench and sleep with him.

"Couldn't I hold the young un while you clear away?" Now was the time to tell that he had a boy just a little bit older, but he couldn't bring his lips to fix the words.

Emmie shook herself as if to free her face from cobwebs. She carried the baby to the bed in the far end of the room—the narrower end as Tim had noticed from outside.

“Don’t you sometimes wish you was a baby ag’in?” She asked Tim as she came back and started clearing away the supper things.

Tim had seen Polly just this tired. He seemed to have remembered hearing Polly say just those words some time years ago.

“You can bed down on your blankets there by the fire, come night,” the old man said to Tim. “I aim to get me a full night’s sleep.”

He went toward the bed, modestly turned his back, slipped his suspenders from his shoulders, and stepped out of his pants. His great hairy legs were strong and well formed in the glimpse Tim got before he climbed beneath the covers. The table cast a shadow on the bed, so that the firelight would not disturb even the lightest sleeper.

And Timothy Taylor Larkin, without realizing what he was doing, started stacking up the dishes, for Emmie had come close to him, and the firelight through her hair made him remember her sister. Maybe Lovie was a mite taller, and at least two years younger. But for all he knew she was already married, and maybe a hussy.

“You must-a been raised different from the men I know,” Emmie said. “They ain’t nary one of them would dirty his hands with dishes.”

Tim laughed. “My ma had three boys, and she worked hard in the field when we was young. Then, too, campin’ on the road’s kind of got me in the habit of clearin’ away.”

“I allus wonder what Lovie’ll ever do once she does git married up and have to work even if she don’t feel a notion to.”

Tim heard himself taking a deep breath of relief. Then he couldn’t imagine what he had to be relieved about. Lovie Romines was nothing to him except someone who looked as

if she'd been dreamed by a mind loco with gold and loneliness.

"Lovie's got ideas—she don't aim to live near to starvation and spend her time savin' an' slavin'. She's had chances to marry, don't ever think she ain't; Lovie's mighty personable. Went home onct aimin' to go get married with a feller at New Madrid. Found he didn't have winder lights in his house, and come on home through the woods alone." Emmie laughed until Tim was sure the old man would call her down for waking him up.

"Pa licked Lovie, but it don't do no good to lick Lovie, she jist went in an' raveled out two pairs o' socks she'd jist finished for Pa. Good socks with red toes an' heels, an' give him the yarn for a present. The man that would get Lovie would have his hands full."

And it would probably be plenty worth it, Tim thought.

"Lovie's past seventeen and she'd ort to of married a year ago."

Emmie stopped with her hands in the soapsuds and stared off out the window, where a pale pink light still filled the sky. "Sometimes I wish I'd been more like Lovie."

Tim felt a lump in his throat, but he would have felt shame if he had realized it. Poor Emmie was such a gay little kid of a person, maybe sorry she'd married an old man. Suppose Polly felt that way now that her husband was off out of the country. But there didn't seem to be any way out for Emmie; the old man's snores sounded good and healthy. She was going to have to content herself with things as they were.

Romie came to the door, listened a moment before he whispered to Emmie, "Where's that stuff you want to send over to Grandpap?"

Emmie motioned for Romie to come in and shut the door. She explained to Tim, "Lark offered Lovie some fresh meat when she come past this afternoon, but Lovie said she wasn't goin' to have all the wildcats in the woods trailin' after her like——" and then she paused, gave a shake of her head toward

Romie, who had his hand over his mouth to keep from giggling out. "Never mind," Emmie finished, "she wouldn't carry it home, and Lark said hell could freeze over before he'd carry any mouthful of fresh meat over there—but Romie and me—we decided we'd git some to Ma for her breakfast; she's just dearly lovin' fresh hog brains with aigs."

Emmie was getting a wooden bucket from under the bottom shelf of the cupboard.

"You wouldn't want to go to bed this early, would you, Mr. Taylor?" Romie asked.

Tim started at the strange name. It was still near daylight, but he'd had a hard day, and if it was expected of him he could make a night of it just like the old man.

"He means would you like to walk with them over to their grandpap's? It ain't more'n a mile, and they'd ort to be a fine moon to come home by."

Emmie seemed to be pleading with him to clear out and give her the cabin. She was sleepy, and she'd have to undress here in this room.

Tim heard himself saying, "Sure, Romie, I'd like to go with you."

It was entirely out of his hands, this business of seeing Lovie Romines again. The Lord knew he hadn't planned to go hunt her out, but if you wanted to be agreeable you had to do what the folks you were visiting suggested. He got his wide tan hat and leather jacket off a peg. Was it only yesterday morning that he and Burgess washed their shirts out at a creek?

Romie was a big talker. Leon just listened and laughed at the right places, often anticipating the laugh before Romie actually got to the funny part, especially when Romie told what it was Lovie said when she wouldn't carry the meat. Tim had to laugh himself. This Lovie wasn't afraid to say the first thing that came into her mind—more like Ma than Polly.

Tim didn't think it out of place that he compared them.

"Lovie's ma ain't our real grandma, but Lovie's pa is ourn. Leon and me was born to Pa's first wife, and she was Grandpa's oldest daughter. Her ma died, and Grandpa married Emmie and Lovie's ma before they was born."

Tim was trying to keep up with the complicated relationship.

"Pa says our ma was even prettier than Emmie or Lovie, smaller, more like Grandpap Romines, but so purty once you'd set your eyes on her you couldn't do nothin' about it. He was walkin' up the trace one day with his pockets full of money and he met Ma drivin' a roan cow. He helped her drive that cow home and jist stayed."

Romie had lowered his voice as if he'd heard the tale second-hand and maybe with cautioning as to how he'd better never let his pap know he'd told it.

Tim thought of the roan cow. It couldn't possibly be the same cow. The one Lovie was hunting was more than likely one of the great-great-granddaughters of the first cow. He'd started out his day noticing a roan cow. If he had been with his pap all these years back he could have had some Irish importance for the situation.

"Before I was borned Pap built the house we live in now." (Romie, Tim thought, of course, that was short for Romines.) "Up till I was about born my folks lived with Grandpap Romines, but Emmie and Lovie was little then, and Grandma Romines set her foot down that nary daughter of Grandpap's was goin' to start breedin' up young uns to be underfoot before she'd got her own out of didies. So Pap had to build a house. I guess hit was a good thing, 'cause he's never been abler than he was then. They say he damned near built that whole house without ary man to help. Pap's mighty strong, as Emmie says, when he wants to be. If it comes to carryin' in wood or buildin' a farr under the wash kittle, he's apt to be down in his back."

Leon and Romie both laughed, but there was only pride in their mirth.

Out here in the near dark, for it was that twilight when the three-quarter moon still looked pale and there was a rim of daylight along the west, these boys looked even more alike. You could see that Romie was maybe a couple of inches taller, but their black hair and blue eyes and fine strong mouths full of bright teeth reminded Tim of something or somebody he'd seen before.

"I'd b-better go on a-ahead," Leon said, "t-to settle the h-hounds."

And Tim knew why Leon didn't talk so much.

"Them hounds of Grandpap's sure can tree coons. Last winter we took 'em and went back into the woods and come home with three coons. Get Pap to tell you about it. Grandpap Romines can't walk so fast 'cause his laigs is short, and he thought he was lost onct. Did you ever think that maybe that's why he keeps hounds—because he's so little? He don't ever waste nothin', and hounds eat a powerful lot of good victuals."

It was strange for Romie to get so serious. Romie must have felt it strange, for he brightened, "I'd sooner go on a coon hunt than eat hog meat when it's fresh, and I sure like hog meat!"

A light came from the window of a cabin ahead, and Tim could hear Leon and the hounds. Suddenly Tim felt as shy as Leon. He wanted to see Lovie, but he'd sooner be chased by one of those hounds than have to go into that cabin and watch her before all of these people. Lovie was his unbelieving dream. She shouldn't be in a house before a fireplace buttering turnips or skimming cream.

But Leon was yodeling from the cabin. In a moment a fluttering light came from the open doorway. Tim heard a woman's voice calling, "I wouldn't-a done hit if I'd been you, Romie, I swear if I would. Lovie here too uppity to tote a mess o' fresh meat home. Come on in here and he'p eat up these dried apple dumplin's your grandpap and Lovie left."

By the time she'd finished talking, Tim and Romie had come into full view.

"Laws, Leon, you didn't say nothin' 'bout a stranger bein' with you."

"Hit's Mr. Taylor. He come clar from down in Arkansas on a white mule."

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Taylor. Come in an' I'll see that I got enough dumplin's for you too. You'll have to eat them without cream, 'cause we're plumb out of a cow."

"That's what I hear." Tim ducked his head to come in the door.

"Our cow got mired down in the swamp two week ago, an' when they got her out they'd broke her laig so bad that Pa had to shoot her."

Tim just missed catching a look from Lovie where she sat on the other side of the table where a platter with three candles made her face look like something religious. He was so tickled he had to act as if he needed to cough.

So she had been as astonished to see him as he was to see her, and she'd said the first thing that came into her head. He should have told her his pockets weren't full of money and he was a married man with a boy.

"Set right down here to the table an' I'll get the dumplin's from the kittle. This is my husband, Jeb Romines, and my girl, Lovie."

Jeb was little. He had a short gray beard and a head going bald.

"You'd ortn't-a told him about our cow; he'll think we're shiftless as Lark Larkin," he spoke into his beard.

His grandsons giggled.

"Grandpap has give us three cows as I can remember," Romie said, "and somethin' allus happens to them. This last one got milk fever when Boy was born an' Emmie couldn't milk."

Tim was not hearing what Romie said; he was holding his breath waiting for Lovie to recognize him.

"You must-a been the man I seen ridin' a gray mule as I come home," Lovie said without a glint of mischief. In fact, she was looking him over as if to be quite sure.

"I wasn't ridin', I was leadin' that mule. He's gone lame in the left hind foot."

"Is that so, now?" Lovie's eyebrows lifted. "Pa says the ice is all gone from the river and creeks. We'd laid out to go fishin' tomorrow. You might get Emmie to make you some dough balls an' come along to catch you a buffalo."

"I ain't fishin'," Old Man Romines said, "I'm not through clearin' off that new patch an' you know hit."

"Pa works." Lovie reached over and patted her father's bent shoulder. "Him and Ma kind of runs a race to see who can work the hardest."

Romie and Leon laughed at this. "G-granma w-wins, she even works at n-night."

"Me and Lark ain't no blood kin," Lovie said. "We like to take our work easy. If Lark ain't too done in from hog killin' he'll go fishin' too. Ma said jist this mornin' she was spoilin' for a good mess o' fish."

"But not river fish," the old lady put in as she set the dump-lings around, "I'd like me a mess of croppie and goggle-eyes."

"Good fishin' around here?"

"Best in the world, 'bout three mile to a creek that runs with fish." Old Man Romines spoiled Tim's intent of the question by answering it himself. "You have to go back from the river a piece to catch croppie."

"And you won't git Lark to walk that fur less it's after a coon," Lovie said.

Tim ate without tasting a bite. As the breath of laughter went around the table it flicked the candles so that he could never be quite sure of Lovie's dimple high on her cheek. He didn't think it queer that Lovie sat at the table while her ma stacked the dishes. He didn't even think it queer that Old Man Romines got up and went into the other room and didn't come back,

or that both boys had curled down by the fireplace and were dozing.

He just sat there and watched Lovie Romines as she talked. It didn't matter what she said so long as the candles lasted. He was startled when Mrs. Romines stumbled over Romie's foot and made him jump.

"Fast asleep! cwyled down here by the farr," she said brusquely. "You'd better be off home before the roosters start wakin' us up for daylight."

So Tim and the boys went from the warm cabin to the brisk night, bright with moonlight.

"I guess you won't go home tomorrer till you go fishin', will you?" Romie asked sleepily as he stumbled along.

Tim did not answer. Even the cold night air, sharp with the smell of the river and cypress trees, hadn't taken from his brain the spluttering candles and warm air in a cabin beating like pulses in young veins about a smooth golden woman who had dared to try the old trick on him—a roan cow, was it?

Had any man ever lived so long in one day? That moon had just gone down this morning when his day started, and now here it was back again, and high above the trees. Could a man come nearer hanging, and still live to laugh about it? He eased his belt under his shirt. Then a strange and earth-shaking thought struck him. Suppose Burgess had claimed he always wore his money belt outside his clothes and used it as a holster for his gun? Outside his clothes it wouldn't have left a mark! Say, he'd outtalked Burgess, the talkingest man he'd ever come up against.

He chuckled aloud. He couldn't hold back the laugh, it bubbled from his mouth like wind after yeasty beer.

"What you laughin' about?" Romie sounded hurt.

Tim thought fast again. "T-that Aunt Lovie of yours," he gasped through his laughter, "sure can say the funniest things."

Romie and Leon joined in the laughter. They rocked the still-

ness and shattered the peace of the woods like screech owls in spring.

Along the bank of a little stream they sat with the sun in their eyes.

The four of them weren't close enough to snarl their fishing lines. Leon was on Lovie's right, then Tim, then Romie. Lovie was the only one with a good-sized fishing cane. The boys had whittled hickory saplings, but Tim was fishing with only string. He'd learned to fish that way when he was a boy and fished from the side of a boat with his pap and Drew.

The weather was unseasonably warm for February, so they'd taken off their coats and hats and flung them over bushes, and Lovie had even threatened to take off her shoes and stockings to cool her toes in the creek that flowed past so slow that you could hardly tell it moved except where it trolled the lines downstream after a long wait.

Tim hadn't felt so young in years. He wanted to rip open his shirt and pull out the money belt and give them all a fistful of double eagles to touch and handle. What was the good of having money if he couldn't show it to a person like Lovie Romines?

He started to laugh from sheer joy of sitting here on this bank beside her with the sun thawing his wintered bones, when Lovie turned on him for silence. Her cork was bobbing up and down.

"Oh, never mind," she said. "Hit was jist a nibble an' I'll bet a double dip of snuff that hit was a grinnel."

"You'd ortn't a told him that way about a grinnel. We might a fooled him like we did the steamboat feller!" Romie scolded.

"We wouldn't want to fool him." All at once Lovie was serious. She drew in her line to look at the bait. The tail of the worm had been nibbled.

Tim was not looking at the bait but at Lovie's hands and

then her throat and her solemn, moist mouth. To have Lovie grow silent and thoughtful made Tim feel his heart had changed to a live hummingbird inside his chest.

All morning they had been gay and talkative, with never a serious moment. Now Tim knew they had been acting like people who knew they had to separate for a long time and couldn't risk a silence. They had walked three or four miles back into the woods to reach the creek that flowed into some little river where they could catch croppie and goggle-eye, and they'd caught both with a couple of drums and as many bullheads. Lovie had wanted to throw the bullheads back because she said her ma hated to skin them, but Romie had said his pap could skin a bullhead or a catfish quicker than most men could scale a croppie.

"So can I," Tim had said. "That's one thing I remember that my pap taught me." (And he had a little boy to whom he must teach the same art.)

But just then Lovie had brought in a croppie, its fins spread as it left the water, glistening, alive with motion. It was hard to find a prettier sight than a fish leaping from the water, an arc of rainbow spraying back to the stream.

"You don't fool people on things like tellin' them grinnels is choicest fish unless you think they're fools in the first place," Lovie said to Romie.

Romie gave her a scornful look. "Oh, pew! It wouldn't-a hurt him. Come on, Leon, they's better places upstream—off them willer saplin's is a dead stump."

And this was just what Tim wanted more than anything and was scared half to death would happen.

Lovie rebaited her hook and whipped it to the middle of the stream. "Lark jist lets them kids of hisn grow up, an' Emmie ain't no hand to teach 'em nothin'."

Tim saw the color come racing to Lovie's cheeks. It was the first time he had seen her blush.

"Young uns sure need some tellin'. 'Course me bein' the one

that would suffer at their jokes—I'm glad you don't think I'm a fool." Tim felt the words knotting in his throat. He didn't want to talk to Lovie. He wanted to sit here in this sunshine and look at her, then put out his hand and stroke her hair and feel if her skin was as smooth as he'd imagined it. He knew he would never dare touch her. Polly was waiting for him twenty or thirty days' journey. Journey that might be as dangerous as the last four, but he would keep his mind on that. Lovie was just a kid, barely seventeen. How would he like for some married man to be making up to Polly's little sister? If he had told Lovie about Polly the first minute he saw her, there in the woods, she would never have brought him fishing. Old Man Romines would have seen to that—yes, there had been a big Bible on old Romines' wall table, and it had looked worn and ragged.

"I think you're probably the smartest man I ever met up with," Lovie said faintly.

"What makes you think so?" Tim felt his fingers knotting his fish line about some weeds. He went over to sit beside her. There was no use having to strain to hear what she said.

"You knowed I hadn't lost a cow when you first saw me." Her face was turned so that he saw the curve of her cheek as smooth as Old Man Arnett's prize apricots.

"No, I didn't." Though he hadn't willed to touch her, Tim felt her hand beneath his, and it didn't relax its hold on the fishing cane.

"Yes, you did, because when you bent down to look for cow tracks that never was there, you said the ones you saw looked two, three day old."

"They did." Tim took the cane from her hands and laid it on the ground on his side away from her. "I really saw that you stood on the ground on two feet."

Lovie turned quickly to look into his face. "Did you think I wasn't real either?"

From between her moist lips her breath came so fast and

close that he could feel it on his cheek. It was balmy as if from a patch of red clover.

Now he found he could not look at her. Why had he taken the fish pole from her hands? The very touch of hands and pulses joined made his will as feeble and dependent upon her will as that cork there on her fishing line. In some far-off existence, as if a dream but dimly recalled, there was Drew to take care of Polly, and Ma still with two boys. They'd all think he was lost in California. He'd send the two hundred to Harmony Blankinship in a package masked to look like clothes, or maybe tobacco, a steamboat captain could take it to St. Louis and get it on the way.

"How far is it to the land that's cleared?" Tim asked.

"You got money to pay?" Lovie's fingers twisted until her hands clasped his.

"Yes."

"Just like Lark?"

And then Tim felt jolted. Could he give up his name of Larkin for the rest of his days? Or would he tell them all? Timothy Taylor—Timothy Taylor. He could hear his mother's voice raised to call him. He only heard his middle name from her when she was cross or astonished or trying to shout him out of hiding.

"Timothy Taylor Larkin," he said aloud.

"No, I mean with money to pay."

Lovie was not forward, as her family had suspected. She had grown shy before him, and her voice quavered when she spoke: "I wouldn't have cared if you had come just in the clothes you stand in."

Tim drew a great breath to get past his own emotion. The boys would be coming back any minute. He took Lovie in his arms and kissed her lips, and knew his life was settled in its eternal path.

"Tomorrow we'll go look at that place for sale. Nobody was ever like you, Lovie."

Close in his arms she said dreamily, "Lark says I ain't a patch on his first wife for looks."

Her golden lashes weighed her eyelids down.

Tim knew he daren't talk.

"Ma won't be so sorry I waited and maybe Pa will get satisfaction out of that sock yarn yet."

"I'll first off tend to gettin' winder lights."

Lovie laughed softly and reached her hand up to smooth his black hair from his forehead. "Emmie told you?"

He nodded. For a moment he thought he could not endure his want of her, to snatch her up and carry her from this bright spot in the sun to some depths in the woods. He knew he could.

"That's the worst story anybody can honest tell about me," Lovie said.

Tim reached back with one hand and got Lovie's fishing cane. "Here," he said, thrusting it into her clinging hands, "the boys will be comin' back, if they ain't already aimin' to jump from behind some bush to yell at us."

Lovie's golden-brown eyes caressed him. "Tomorrow should we tell Ma after we've come back from lookin' at the place?"

Tim followed Lovie and the boys home with their strings of fish. The boys chattered about taking Tim jug-fishing tomorrow.

"But there ain't no point in jug-fishin' if there's four jugheads like us to watch the bobber," Lovie laughed. "Anyhow, Ma's got blackberry cordial or elderberry wine or vinegar or molasses in all the jugs."

Lovie had become her old lively self before the boys, but Tim found it almost impossible to talk. Women were queer. How they could cling in your arms, silent and breathless with their eyes closed and the next be talking about jug-fishing. It almost made him so mad at Lovie that he thought of Polly and the boy. But Lovie's straight back was there before him, with her coil of hair glistening in the sunlight that spangled down

through the bare trees. He wanted to lay his hands about her waist and turn her around to face him, to force her lips to answer his, her very breathing a response to his insistent desire.

Her slim ankles in the crude shoes swung on before him, now and then jumping a ditch, pattering faster up the side of a gully, as a colt would do, making him lengthen or shorten his stride as her will demanded.

He could feel her lips beneath his without a trace of shyness in the way they had clung to his, and yet here she could chatter on as if he weren't turning over his world to have her. Tearing his past out by the roots like cockleburs from a cornfield. But like the burs that the animals carry from patch to patch on their fur, little Timmy would have Drew to cling to—and his grandpap with all the slaves.

Lovie turned quickly to look at him as Romie and Leon plunged on, still arguing about jug-fishing.

"I dasn't tell them there'll be plenty of jugs empty after we've told Ma and the rest." Her face was alight with sudden knowing passion. She let her eyes close, drew a deep breath. "What if you'd never come this way to find me out lookin' for somethin' I'd never lost?"

Then she turned quickly to answer Leon's stuttering taunt about keeping up.

"Why you've got plenty fish for Emmie an' Lark too," Old Lady Romines came from her clattering loom to say to them.

Leon and Romie carried the fish, two fine strings of them, that still flipped a fin or twirled a feeler.

"You run fetch your pa and Emmie, Leon, an' tell your pa to bring his fish knife to skin these bullheads."

"I can skin them, Mis' Romines," Tim said as he came up on the gallery behind Lovie. "That is if you got a whetstone around here. I allus carry a good knife."

"Lovie'll show you." The old lady was untying her cross-stitched apron.

Tim believed this was the first time he had really seen her. Last night she had just been a voice to him, buzzing away there in the warm room like a fly over a cake, but standing here in the light doorway she didn't look as old as Ma, though of course she didn't have Ma's wealth of brown hair. If you'd seen her away from Lovie you might even say the old woman wasn't bad looking with her brown eyes and high color.

"Romie, you git ready to build a farr in the yard," she ordered. "Hit's a nice day an' we won't have the fish smell in the house."

When Lark came up with Leon, Tim was well into the business of skinning the bullheads. Lovie stood around and watched him and fetched and carried for her ma, who was cutting up the fish as Tim cleaned them.

A cypress log that lay where it had fallen was the table at which Tim worked. Old Man Romines had leveled off about four feet of it so that it wouldn't be too high for the women, but Tim felt himself getting a kink in his spine that hindered his hurry with the sharp knife, skinning and slitting the fish.

"First time I ever before seen a man clean catfish my way," Lark said to Tim after he'd watched for a few minutes. He had hitched himself up on the end of the log.

"My pa showed me this way when I was a little shaver back in Ohio," Tim said without looking up.

"You don't say."

"Guess I still can't skin as fast as he could." Tim looked up into the startlingly blue eyes of Old Lark. Last night it had been too dark to see the old man's eyes, but now they reminded him of someone he had seen before. His eyes didn't look old; they looked out of place above that gray beard. "You know," Tim apologized for his staring, "but I guess I hadn't noticed how blue your eyes was till now, you—" he started to say something about his own relatives, but remembered in time, "—you must a been some kin to the Larkins I used to know in Ohio."

"Could be." Old Lark slid off the log and sauntered toward the cabin.

"Now did I say somethin' I shouldn't?" Tim asked Old Lady Romines as he watched Lark's tall figure dwarf the native timbered doorway as he entered the house.

"I don't think so; more likely hit's because he seen Emmie come waggin' that heavy Boy on her hip. I guy him about lettin' Emmie carry that young un around so much," Mrs. Romines said. "Emmie, put that young un down and let him walk. You're goin' to make yourself one-sided an' that young un a cripple because he ain't ever needed to use his laigs."

Emmie obediently set Boy on his own feet but otherwise ignored her mother's greeting. "My, I'm glad you all got fish. Already I'm tarred of fresh pork. I think I'm even goin' to let Lark smoke the tenderloins this year."

Mrs. Romines worked quickly, as if her hands were mechanical. She started talking to Boy, as grandmothers are apt to talk, then changed her tone to tell Lovie to go get another skillet from the house.

Lovie brushed Tim as she passed. He wanted to rise from bending over the log table and get the kink out of his back, but he knew if he stood there staring after her the whole family would know how he felt.

"Just three more, Mis' Romines," he said.

"You're equal to Lark when it comes to skinnin' bullheads. Romie," the old woman interrupted herself, "put a leetle more wood on this farr, an' Emmie, you take this baby in the house before he gits hisself burnt up."

Tim looked at the little blond Boy. He could walk, though not too sure of his feet.

"How old is he?"

"Fifteen month." Emmie had him on her hip again. "Ma worries about me carryin' him so much, but he's still just a baby child." She smoothed the top of the baby's head and kissed him lightly on the forehead.

Tim felt his throat twist. He wasn't sure whether it was because Emmie looked so much like Lovie at that moment, or because Boy was exactly the age of his own little Timmy when his pap went off to California after gold. Timmy was walking better than than Boy, Tim assured himself. But Lovie was coming back with the skillet.

Her plaid skirt billowed once in the breeze, and she didn't even bother to hold it down; just came swinging on toward him with her fine knees showing, though he didn't dare let his eyes go from her eyes that held his with a laughing glint.

"Ma, if this breeze comes up we'll wish we'd fried these in the house," Lovie said. There was an edge to her voice.

"Too much smoke, an' I do despise havin' my weavin' all smelled up with grease," the old lady said firmly. "Lovie, you watch this fish now an' I'll go in the house and stir up the corn bread. Romie, you go git me a good load of wood and bring it in the house. Emmie, give me that Boy, I'll carry him in for you if you'll bring them cleanin' knives."

Tim chose to stay there by the log watching Lovie stretch and bend over the fire, for she was turning the fish with a long hickory fork. He knew he should go join Lark in the house; all of them would probably expect it, but he leaned against the cypress log and courted Lovie with his eyes. The flames made her apricot skin flush, and a little frown that came between her golden brows served to make her look busy and able instead of cross, as it would most women. She was fighting smoke that whipped and veered as the breeze changed.

"I do wish Ma wasn't so particular about her old weavin'. Allus, if it's not bone-crackin' cold we got to fry fish outdoors."

She moved to the other side of the fire to get out of the smoke.

Tim grinned. "I ain't ever yet seen a ma and her girl that could agree on everything."

Lovie jerked the skillet until some of the grease sizzled in

the flame. "Nobody in the world has got a right to be as particular as Ma, though."

Tim wanted to change the subject. "Beauty draws smoke," he said tenderly.

Lovie raised her head so that she might have looked at him if she hadn't been still watching the skillet. The strange dimpled her cheek, "I wonder, would you git like Lark with his first wife?"

"How's that?"

"He thought he didn't like the way other men looked at her."

"Funny how folks change, ain't it? To see him now, you'd 'low he's allus been old, all but his eyes."

"Not Lark! Why I remember when his hair and beard was black as yours, an' come to think of it not so much different." Lovie squinted at him as if seeing him for the first time in too bright a light. "He didn't start goin' gray till after Romie and Leon's ma died. If she'd lived two or three year more he'd probably-a took me in place of Emmie, 'cause Emmie would of married somebody else."

Tim wanted to pull Lovie away from the fire, to hold her close so as to assure himself that she was glad she had waited, but she was on the other side of the fire.

"Though we was just half sisters, Lark always said I was more like his first wife than like Emmie."

Tim tried to make out what Lovie was coming to.

"When I was growin' up I thought more of Lark than I did of Pa. Ma got malarly the year after Romie was born, an' for three or four year I lived at Lark's. You wouldn't ever tell it now to look at Ma she's so stout, but she was mighty poorly for a long time."

Tim still couldn't figure. He didn't say anything.

"I just wanted you to know that Lark is mighty partial to me, and to tell you why so's you wouldn't be jealous."

"Sure, Lovie."

He leaned against the log in lazy fashion. A couple of cats

had come and eaten up the fish heads (the dogs had been shut up for fear they would get fish bones in their throats). There still remained some fish scales to glitter here and there and leave their smell, but in the open air and blended with the mouth-watering whiff of hickory smoke and frying fish it was all good.

"I guess I wouldn't be jealous of a man twice my age." Tim knew he was lying. He wished she hadn't told him.

"You go fetch a platter from the house—will you?" Lovie had piled the one she had with golden-brown fish.

When Tim got to the door he was met by the sharp odor of freshly cut onions and a loud laugh that stopped when he entered.

What could these people be laughing at that made them cut short their humor so quickly? But instead of asking, he told them Lovie needed another platter. He felt as resentful as he had felt the first time he ever set foot in the Arnett house. Why was he always being made to feel an outsider? Surely Lovie would change all of that. Lovie was a leader; people said and thought what she wanted them to, all except Old Lady Romines.

"You want to look sharp for some trick," Lovie said as she took the platter from him. "I heard 'em laugh and then hush up when you went to the house. Sometimes they joke hard with strangers. Lark would play a joke on St. Peter if he thought it would 'get' him."

"Say, I wish you'd talk about me now and then and not so much about Lark." Tim heard his own voice strained with anger.

Lovie laid the hickory turning fork across the log and came toward Tim. "I can see it's goin' to be lucky we're aimin' to live three or four miles off." She put her hands on Tim's shoulders and right there in broad daylight lifted her face to be kissed.

Her nearness made his head swim, but his fear that some

of the family would come popping out of the house made him give her a regardless peck on the mouth.

Lovie looked hard into his eyes. "You're kind of queer. One minute I think I need a handful of cockleburs for protection, an' the next I think you might likely run if I said boo, or so much as touched you with a hickory fork."

Tim grinned down at her. "I'm just not used to anyone so heady fair as you offerin' to kiss me, and here in the yard it's kind of public."

Lovie laughed until the dimple came again. Her glistening fairness seemed to kindle a glow about her, as if she stood in a spot of sunlight that slanted into a cave, a light and warmth in a circle of damp darkness.

What did he care who opened the door and came out? He and Lovie aimed to tell her folks tomorrow that they were going to hunt a marrying man.

Tim wasn't quite sure how the coon-hunt idea had started. Whether it was Old Man Romines talking about his hounds needing a good run, or Old Lark talking about this being the right time of the moon for sighting coons, or Romie actually begging his pap to take the stranger for an exciting night. Fishing was all right, but to hunt coons was ten times more fun.

They always aimed to start along after bedtime, when the moon was up beyond the trees and almost light enough to read a Bible by if you had one.

It was less than an hour out from the house when the dogs treed their first coon.

"A sweeter sound you'll never hear this side heaven than them hounds hot on a scent of a coon," Old Man Romines said. "But you have to tie knots in your shirttail gettin' through these woods to keep up with that Boff dog. She's got a nose that can smell a mile."

Lark was always in the lead.

"He knows these woods and can outwalk the boys and me,"

the old man panted. "I wouldn't have nobody between Lark an' me in a woods. These young uns would as soon go off an' leave me if I'd stumble or git winded—Lark here's accountable for me, seein' he's married two o' my gals."

Tim wondered why the short little man would spend breath to talk when the hounds were yapping so.

"I bet hit's the same tree we got one out of last time," Romie shouted.

Tim could hear Lark crashing ahead. He wished he didn't have to keep boosting Old Man Romines along; he'd like to be out in front with Lark.

"Knees!" Old Romines shouted to warn Tim before he cracked into a mass of cypress knees.

Here in this bog of cypress each man had to look out for his own shins.

"They got one all right," Lark sang out. "I ain't ever knowed Boff to be fooled, and it's Boff makin' most of the racket."

"Let me shoot hit, Pap." Romie begged as he ran.

"No all-fired hurry. We'll see who spots 'im first," Lark said from where he sat on a fallen timber.

When Tim came up into the confusion of the hounds he felt the excitement that Romie showed. That the boys' pa could sit there in all this excitement was beyond Tim, but it had also been beyond him to see Lark streak off through the brush like lightning—the Lark who had gone to bed before five o'clock because he was so tired, or the Lark who seemed to mosey when he walked.

"Can you see hit?" Romie asked.

"That's up to you young uns and the stranger." Lark's voice was full of good feelings and suggested laughter.

Tim could see why the boys were so proud of their pap.

Romie went to the off side of the moon so the light would show up the furry mass, hunched in some crotch of the tree.

Tim sidled around after him. He couldn't see well up in the thicket of branches. How they could hope to land a coon by

just seeing its bulk against the moon was more than he could understand. So many things looked bulky.

"Lay down, Boff! Lay down." Lark shouted as if he were getting tired of the racket. Boff dropped in her tracks, her nose close to the ground. The other dogs had to be called off one by one, and with more commands.

"I have best luck shinin' a torch up in the tree to git the glint o' a coon's eyes," Old Romines said, "but Lark here allus says to carry along torches is wasted weight."

"We wouldn't dare shoot a coon out even if we could spot hit till them hounds was calmed," Romie told Tim with pride of knowledge. "They'd tear hit to pieces before we could git from here to yonder. Sometimes Pap takes the hounds off on another trail before we shoot."

"A-an' sometimes we j-just have to set an' wait," Leon said.

"Peers to me that's what we're goin' to have to do this time," Old Romines muttered. "That moon's got to move three, four feet with the shadder to bulk this coon against hit."

"I-I'm cold," Leon's teeth were chattering.

"Git some wood then and build a farr."

"Sure, we uns has got to set this coon out."

"One coon ain't enough," Romie started off, as if complaining, and then began shouting, "look, Pap, I see it, I see it, can I shoot?"

"That's a squirrel nest." Old Lark's contempt wasn't the kind that would raise a boy's dander but would whet his sight next time. "Ever see a coon look the size of a bushel basket?"

Tim was glad he hadn't mentioned the sight of the same bunch against the moonlight.

"What you say, Romie, that Mr. Taylor and me go on and see if we can tree another coon while you boys stay here with your grandpap to watch this one. Whoever sees hit first gits to shoot first; if he misses, the next one."

"Sure."

"Romie, you he'p me an' Leon get a farr started."

So Tim and Old Lark took the hounds and started off again. The two men were so near a size that they seemed to match their stride, though they were single file through the trees and underbrush. This was so much better than trailing the old man and the two boys that Tim was glad they were alone. He was going to enjoy being a brother-in-law to this Larkin who strode along fast and sure through moonlight and thicket without once banging against anything or taking a limping pace of hurry-and-stop through the woods.

"The old man gits winded easy," Lark said. "Me an' the boys aim to let him stop before he gits too wore out. He won't tell how old he is, but them that's been around here a long time says he's at least seventy. Old Lady Romines is his second wife." Lark was talking easily as he walked, with never a breathless word.

The dogs were ahead now, swiveling through the woods, their noses to the ground. Tim felt exhilarated and young in spite of the weight of the money belt and his past. He might confess to Lark about his real name and the money—no, just the money. Maybe he should. Somebody should know before he just up and married Lovie. While they sat beside a fire waiting to get a coon he would tell Lark about California and the long nights and the hard days and poor grub and the fact that it was all going to be worth it now that he'd found Lovie.

Lovie strode beside him that first day; she walked before him today; tomorrow she would lie in his arms, and he would have to tell her what caused the rough places on his skin.

Once he had thought of Polly's little hands rubbing his bare sides, crying over his scars, jumping out of bed to light a candle to hunt some ointment, and then his laughing at her concern because his scars were tough and healed like new growth on an elm tree where a limb was hacked to mark a trail.

"Lovie's ma can cook a coon till there ain't no better meat," Lark said. "You ain't aimin' to hurry off now till we eat these coons, are you?"

"No, I guess I'll eat me a bait of coon meat first."

Now was the time to start telling that he intended to settle right here beside the river.

"Lovie is goin' to take more managin' than Emmie ever did. Sometimes I think strongheaded women is the best investment for a man."

Tim thought of Emmie sneaking out the brains and hog's head to her ma. Maybe he should tell Emmie to spunk up to Lark instead of getting her own way by stealth.

"Lovie could have ary single man in this county an' half the men from the river boats, she's such a looker."

Right now, Tim felt, he should explain that he had no intentions of trifling with her affections. He knew Lark was trying to sound him out. It would be easy to talk to this Larkin fellow; it might even be so easy that he could tell his real name.

And then they heard "that Boff dog," as Old Man Romines called her, scenting a coon. The dogs tore off to the right and the two men thumped through the woods as fast as they could go.

"You're good for another chase yet," Lark said. "Some time since I see a feller that could keep up with me in the woods. I've a mind you could even outwalk me if you tried."

They were sitting on a log looking up into the tree where they had already spotted the coon. However, they weren't ready to shoot it out, because all they could see was the hunch of a back, which left them no way of telling which end was head or tail. A hurried shot now might just burn the coon into action, and Old Man Romines hated to have his Boff dog chewed up in a fight.

"I mind one night when the old man shot at a coon settin' like this one," Lark said. "That coon dropped out of that tree and might near took the old man. The dogs was after the coon, the coon got ahold of the old man's britches leg and swung on. In tryin' to beat him off I hit a log instead and bent the muzzle

of my gun. The old man had already fired his ball. We had to go home that night without any coon and the old man's leg practically bare."

Tim felt Lark was in such good humor that he surely could bear to hear about Lovie. "I bet Lovie didn't mend his pants."

"She wasn't over ten year old then, but when she seen her pap's pants tore up that way, she said never before was she so mad she wasn't a boy, so's she could go along to see her pap dance on one leg."

"I've a mind to marry with Lovie tomorrow," Tim said slow and even.

"I thought you was feelin' that way about her, and I knowed she was feelin' that way about you. First time I ever see Lovie givin' time to a feller willin' like."

"We thought we'd go look over that place you was speakin' of; I got a little money."

"Right good investment, both Lovie *and* the land."

"I ain't seen the land yet, but I feel mighty content."

"How'd you git your money, if that's a fair question?"

"Minin' in Californy."

"You don't say! It's goin' to be interestin' to have a prospector in the family to tell gold diggin' tales—though so far I ain't figgered you as much of a talker."

"Don't pay, till you know them you're talkin' to."

Tim wanted to tell about the posse and the little runt, but he could hear that Boff dog scuttling around through the leaves as if she were going to go off on a hot scent.

"Suppose you build yourself a fire here and watch this coon while I go on with this dog. We're mighty close to the road here. If you git worried an' cain't figger your way home, go straight south an' you'll run into the road. The same one that you come to our place on."

Tim scratched around in the brush to find some leaves and tinder that weren't damp by the frosts, and cleared away a

space. The light of his fire, as well as the dogs, would have to guide Lark back to him.

When his fire blazed up he could see the eyes of the coon glaring down at him. Now was the time to shoot: Old Man Romines' way of getting a coon instead of waiting for the moon to move a shadow so you could tell which end of the coon was which.

Tim took careful aim. He'd hate to have to go back to the Romines' house with one toe out. It would have to be a mighty coon to get past those Californy boots. Tim chuckled to himself.

It was going to be mighty good down here where people laughed, and hunted coons and fished in the sun when they were in the notion. It would be good just to sit if you wanted to rest, with nothing pushing like the Arnetts and their slaves and good crops and well-kept land that you felt you had to drive yourself to keep up. Down here you could set your own pace.

He fired his gun and heard the coon drop through the branches to the side of his little fire. Tim went over to see if he'd made a clean shot of it. Slowly he prodded the side of the animal and discovered the neck had been broken in the fall, so if the shot hadn't been perfect he'd have had a dead coon. He picked it up and turned it in the light. A fine skin. He could remember the day when he'd have prized that skin for a cap, with a circled tail down the back. Maybe Romie or Leon would prize such a cap—or was it too hot down here to wear fur on your head? Lovie might want it for a neckpiece, like Polly had on her gray velvet cape.

Like Polly!

Tim sat down beside the fire. He was going to have to put Polly out of his mind. He hadn't seen her for two years. She hadn't seen him either. All of these years he'd been completely away from women, while Polly had been surrounded by men. Drew and all the rest in the countryside had been at her beck and call. She'd probably danced at play parties, sung to the music. She was as light on her feet as a leaf in a breeze. She could

have taken Timmy along to sit and doze while she danced—he was big enough. And Polly would be rested at nights now when she was home with her pa's niggers to wait on her hand and foot. She could dance as she'd danced when she was a girl, before she grew heavy with child or weariness.

Polly was never pretty like Lovie—the kind of woman you knew you wanted at first sight. Polly had a narrow face with fine features and a nice nose, and she made up her mind slow, so that you knew that high forehead was for a purpose. Yet the time she'd jumped off her pony when he struck some quicksand, and managed to get him out all by herself, she'd thought pretty fast. The only way you could tell she'd been scared nearly out of her wits was by the coldness of her hands afterwards.

Polly didn't really need him. She could take care of herself, and he didn't intend to feel ashamed that he'd decided to stay down here. Any man would do for Polly. Lovie had picked him the same as he had picked her, and a twenty-day journey from Clay County—he'd never meet any of Polly's friends so she'd need to feel belittled. It would look as if he'd died on the trail somewhere.

She'd probably feel sorry when he didn't come back, but she wouldn't grieve, and she certainly wouldn't brush her hair night in and night out so it would be bright when he came back, as Ma had done all these years. If Polly just knew how bone-weary he was she'd forgive him even if she should find out sometime, though of course she wouldn't.

Suddenly he was startled by Old Lark's voice. "Is your name Larkin?"

"Yes."

"Why did you try to pass yourself off as Taylor?"

Tim was wide awake now. This was the second time he'd been awakened to present danger and couldn't quite make the thing clear to himself. Maybe this was Lark's joke Lovie had suspected.

"That's a long story."

"Tell it." Old Lark towered there beside the low campfire. The moonlight about him left a shadow black with depth; the red light of the campfire left a vaguer shadow that struck off at right angles to the other. But it was the camp light that made Old Lark's eyes remind Tim of the coon in the tree, only this time Tim felt he was the coon. And none of this had anything to do with a trick or joke.

Tim wanted to stand up so that he would be as tall as Lark and wouldn't have to take that fury from his eyes slanting down and seeming to gain speed as a cart down a hill. He wanted to be on a level with those eyes.

He started to rise.

"Tell your story settin'," Old Lark ordered. "If I thought you'd eviled Lovie, I'd shoot you where you lay."

Tim was thinking fast now. What could have come over old Lark? He didn't just go off there in the woods and by himself think up all this wrathiness. Tim heaved a great sigh.

"You must-a met up with a little dude of a runt—black mustache goin' gray next to his lip."

"What's he got to do with you?"

"Nothin', only he's tried to kill me for my gold; he tried to get a posse to hang me so's he could strip it off and claim it his." Tim was looking up into Old Lark's face. His white beard and hair looked less white in the moonlight, and you couldn't tell the color of his eyes—but all at once Tim felt cold sweat pour over him—it was almost as if he were a little boy again, looking up into his pap's eyes; he could feel the sway of the raft in the current and the weight of a fish knife in his hands.

"Pap!" Tim whispered.

Lovie had said he came up from New Orleans with his pockets full of money when he met Romie and Leon's ma driving a roan cow. He heard Lovie's words, "Lark says I ain't a patch on his first wife for looks."

Old Lark didn't blink an eye.

"Your little runt might-a done all that, but he ain't had nothin' to do with the fact that you've got a woman and a young un waitin' up north fer you."

"They was three young uns waitin' fer you, Pap," Tim argued. He felt sorry for the old man, but he was going to make him admit his own guilt. He wasn't going to let him push off any of this saint stuff on him.

"You think you could find your way back to the house an' that white mule o' yours?" Lark asked as if Tim had never said a word.

"I ain't goin'." He and Lovie were going to get settled in a place of their own tomorrow. Old Man Romines with his Bible might not like having his daughter married to a man with a wife, but he wouldn't ever know.

"Yes you are goin'—and tonight. When Lovie hears you got a wife an' kid she ain't goin' to warm up to you. Lovie's proud an' she can take her choice."

"She wouldn't need to know."

"Everyone in the landin' south o' here knows. Lovie ain't deaf. Anyhow, she'd be a mighty young widder woman—they's too many gunnin' fer that gold you wear around your waist. I'd been tryin' to figger what made you walk that heavy way ever since the first time I seen you."

His voice was calm and kind now, as if he'd been talking about the coon that lay beside the fire. "I'll show you a way out of the woods so's you can git around this little mustached feller and his two companions, and you hightail it for Clay County before your hide is so full of holes Lovie couldn't use it to hold shucks."

"But Pap, that's at least twenty days away, maybe thirty, and Lovie's more to my taste. Pap, I tell you I can't leave Lovie this way." Tim was begging as he'd begged to go on the raft with his pap that day back in Ohio.

"This ain't no place for a man like you." Old Lark's voice was heavy. "You've got ambition to accumulate somethin'—

how'd you like it down here if Lovie'd throw you over—I'm aimin' to tell her about your wife in the mornin' and if she won't throw you over, Old Man Romines will fill you full of buckshot."

"Pity he didn't know about you when you first come down here—about Minerval!" Tim was bitterly sarcastic. "Pity there wasn't some sanctimonious——"

Old Lark blazed out at him, "Hush your mouth, and git up from there and out of this part of the country before I lose my temper, do you hear? Back to where you belong. You're goin' if I have to march you off at the point of my gun."

Riding Lonesome towards the setting moon, Tim looked like a scarecrow being moved from some young corn patch: he sat his mule so loose jointed, so utterly without hope.

He didn't care if he ever got home; he was too sunk in self-pity to even hate Burgess and the two men that had told Old Lark. He was too exhausted from his fury at his own father, who wouldn't admit his fatherhood, to longer mind whether the old man kept his promise to detain Burgess. He didn't even care if Burgess double-crossed both the men and came to jump out from behind some depth of blackness. He could have the gold and welcome now so long as Lovie couldn't share it. Why hadn't he thought of some way to get around his pap? He could still head for St. Louis, though already he was well on the trail that led catty corner across to the northwest. Head for St. Louis, maybe become a river man. Invest his gold in some kind of business. Not right in St. Louis, because too many men from Clay County came down there to do trading. Maybe buy land. Learn how to farm cotton, or just corn and hemp as he already knew.

He had sworn at his pap as no son should ever swear. He had called him names that he had no consciousness of ever having known before. But now he didn't even have a bitter hate to sustain himself, for his pap had looked beaten at the last.

The moon was sinking below the trees; in another half hour you could see daylight—but for that half hour there would be darkness so thick neither he nor Lonesome could dare move ahead.

Tim wished he had appetite for the fresh tenderloin his pap had cut off for him and made him take along with three cakes that Emmie might miss, come breakfast. Emmie, who laughed high like a child, and was already sick of fresh pork, but who loved Boy almost too much for his own good.

That's what his own ma had said about Polly and little Timmy. "Another young un comin' along would be the best thing for little Timmy; too much lovin' is apt to stunt a baby."

Tim stopped Lonesome and built up a fire.

There was a taste of salt on his lips.

PART III

March 1852

DAYS AND NIGHTS without distinction had passed for Tim. Of course, sometimes it rained, twice it snowed, now and then the nights were so cold that Tim had to seek shelter in some barn, but never would he go into the settler's house, because of his loneliness and fear.

He was glad to be alone with this mule that he understood, and with his grief over Lovie and his own pap. Grief held him stupefied for maybe a week of his journey, until the new moon seemed to prick him with her slender scimitar—to remind him that as she grew to full he must complete his journey. He must use this money that he'd groveled out of the earth, fought for, and now at last given up the one love that he wanted most of all.

Lonesome, the pacing mule, had grown companionable. When Tim let the pace slow into an ambling walk it was time to stop for food or rest. When Lonesome brayed sharply and broke into a running trot, there was a body of water ahead. If

Tim overslept, at the first break of light Lonesome snorted like a leaky bellows. More than once when Tim had forgotten to take time out for rest, Lonesome had stopped suddenly in the middle of a gallop and nearly pitched his rider into a somersault over the deer's antler saddle horn.

Last night there had been another bright moon. It rose at sundown and set just before dawn, but because the days were longer there was no period of blackness to separate the night from day.

Willows along the Missouri River caught the light on their spring-yellowed branches and threw it back at Tim as he packed his duffel for the last time. Tonight he should be at home, barring accident or weather. A tightness in his throat squeezed him as if to make him confess he was glad to be back, to force the grudging words from his grudging lips.

For twenty-eight days he had not let himself wonder how he would greet Polly or what he would say to his ma to keep her from guessing that he'd seen her husband, Patrick Larkin. And now he stood on the bank of the river across from Clay County and felt his slow pulse quicken.

There were barges loaded with hackled hemp and coal and fine fat hogs. There were Negro slaves singing on a steamboat as they scrubbed and painted it for spring. No ice was in the river, foam flecked the eddies, and Tim was grateful for the stout ferryboat that would carry him from Sibley across to his own.

As he set foot in Clay County to lead Lonesome from the chuffing ferry, the bright March day seemed to fog up on him. Two years and one month since the day he'd left, and here he was back again with enough money to buy a section of land, though of course two hundred dollars belonged to Harmony Blankinship and two hundred to Mr. Arnett.

He mounted his mule and started for home, and suddenly he couldn't decide where home was. Whether he should go to

Ma's first or to Arnett's to find Polly and the boy. Maybe he should go to Arnett's first and then go on over to his ma's for the night.

He hated himself for the thought, but he knew that was why he should reach Arnett's first, so he could spend the night alone at his ma's, sleeping in the loft on a featherbed beside his two brothers.

Lonesome seemed to sense his hurry, for Tim couldn't account for the mule's quick pace by the fact that he knew he was going home. This mule had never been north of Arkansas until Tim brought him. Maybe it was the smell of fresh-plowed ground or fresh-cut timber or burning stalks; and then again it might have been the sight of winter wheat, so green it looked unreal; or the closer set of farms with stock in barn lots and teams of mules driven by healthy blacks hauling things along the double wagon tracks.

Tim watched every face to see if he wouldn't recognize one. Always he spoke to those he met in the road, but no more than, "Howdy" "Good March weather."

At noon Tim did not stop to cook. He'd bought a nubbin of cheese and some rolls from an old woman in Sibley, and these he ate impatiently while Lonesome cropped some greenery along the side of the road where the bank had felt the sun. He should make the Arnetts' by three o'clock if Lonesome didn't balk on him.

Maybe he should stop by at Harmony Blankinship's and give her the two hundred dollars before he even went to the Arnetts'. That would give Lonesome a drink and a breather. Harmony's run-down place wasn't more than a half a quarter away. Poor Harmony, she picked a mighty weak reed when she picked Blank, and with her laugh and dimples she could have had her choice of a dozen fellows. Nobody with Harmony's ways should ever worry from loneliness.

He reached the corner where the lane led off to Harmony's

place, and since Lonesome was beginning to slow down, Tim took it.

"Might's well git this money off my waist and free of my conscience," he thought. He felt happy in spite of himself.

Big old lazy Blank had given him twelve and a half ounces of gold to make the two hundred dollars, and enough more to pay for the minting. He especially wanted ten twenty-dollar gold pieces for Harmony, and with this to completely buy his freedom. Knowing Harmony, Tim had suggested that she'd be glad to take less. Blank had decided to go on to Australia with a bunch of miners who had grown tired of California.

As he rode up to her house Tim was astonished to see six horses in her badly fenced lot. Harmony must have struck it rich; she didn't need this money. Poor Blank, gone off with half enough for comfort to make this gesture of plenty. These two children playing with a battered copper kettle and two gourd dippers would be Blank's young ones.

Tim tied his mule and came up the path that hadn't been swept since last fall, for there were acorns and rotted locust pods underfoot. The children stopped their play to stare. Tim strode ahead, because he was in such a hurry. The door burst open, and there stood Harmony with a baby at her breast.

"Well, I never! If it ain't Tim Larkin, big as life!" Her dimples were still there, and her skin was almost as fair and soft as that of the fuzzy-headed baby. She looked like a great big jolly baby herself—one that was a little too wise. Tim had to laugh back at her, though he knew in a flash that this baby nursing so gustily couldn't possibly belong to Blank (unless it had been a phenomenally backward young one).

Tim could feel his face red up, but he didn't want Harmony to know he was without words to talk.

"Blank ain't with you, is he?" She put one plump dimpled hand on Tim's shoulder to lean toward him and whisper.

"No." Tim moved away.

"Mortie, you can come out then," Harmony shouted back into a cluttered room that smelled of boiled turnips.

A sheepish man with carrot-colored sideburns came from behind the bed head.

"When I saw you I thought sure Blank was somewhere along, and it would be just like that galavantin' two-legged varmint to try to catch me in some kind of unfavorable light." Harmony was laughing as she talked, and never once interrupted the feeding baby.

"Tim, meet Mortie Linders. Them horses in the lot is Mortie's. He makes good money tradin'."

Tim knotted his fists inside his pockets at the better sight of Mortie. This baby would be his, and with Blank's two hundred dollars he'd be off and leave Harmony with nothing but the run-down place and probably not a horse to drag a plow to support these young ones.

"Be damned if I do," Tim said to himself, and aloud to Harmony, "I promised Blank I'd look you up soon as I got back, to tell you he'd decided to go to Australy."

"No more than I expected of him," Harmony said.

"I wondered if I could give my mule a drink at your spring before I take out for home."

"Oh, you ain't been there yet?"

"No, you're the first person I've seen that I reco'nized since I left Blank in San Francisco back in December."

Harmony's eyes almost bulged with brightness, "You don't say. Well, I'm mighty proud you come by here first." Her very look at Mortie said things that hadn't entered Tim's head. "You mean you ain't even seen Polly?"

"No," Tim said on his way out. "I'll just water my mule and be off."

"I guess you know your way about here, Tim, so I won't need to send Mortie." Her voice was smooth as sorghum and about as sticky. And then, as if she could see from Tim's stiff back that he wasn't liking what she said, she stepped to the little

porch and called to him, "Don't let all that money you brung back turn your head. Marryin' an Arnett didn't spoil you, Tim, the way everybody said it would—now don't let all this gold do it."

Tim had to turn to look back at her. With her plump hand she was shielding the baby's head from the sharp March wind, and as the sunlight fell on both of them they made a real picture. Tim bet she never had any trouble nursing her babies the way Polly did with little Timmy. Tim hoped Polly wouldn't know he came by here first. Why had he been such a fool?

He watered Lonesome and started off at a sharp trot.

It was less than three miles to the Arnett place, and Tim remembered the first time he'd taken this road, in a snowstorm behind almost played-out oxen, and as a little boy he'd worn Drew's outgrown shoes.

When the mule began to show signs of balking, Tim's eagerness forced him to get off and walk ahead. He couldn't understand this driving hurry to get to the Arnetts'. He'd thought his feet would be weighted instead of light as wind. Maybe it was because he had to see Polly before she heard he'd been to Harmony's first—but that was foolish.

One more corner and he could see the stake and rider fence that led up to the Arnetts' big house, and here at last he was going to meet somebody. It looked to Tim as if it might be a woman riding with a child in front of her. The sun was in his eyes, or he might have known before he heard her cry out: "Timothy!" and almost fall off the horse to run to meet him.

She was in his arms crying over him, holding his face in her hands almost as if she had been blinded by her loneliness for him and had to get the knowledge of his living presence through her fine finger tips.

"Oh Timothy, I knowed you even through this beard! But it was your walk that did it. These long legs and wide shoulders hunkerin' ahead." She pulled his face down to hers and

ran her fingers over his deep-set eyes, "You got about as much meat on you as a piece of tanned leather."

"You ain't any too fat yourself." Tim could not understand his happiness at having Polly in his arms, for he had thought he would be held by his love for Lovie from making even a sign of affection in reply to Polly's arms and lips.

"Oh Timothy, God does answer prayers!" She laid her head against him as if she'd been lost for a long time and found herself again. "Time and again folks has said you'd never come back—never—all but Pap and your ma. They wouldn't give you out either."

Tim was holding her close, and he wasn't sure his own eyes were dry, for it seemed he was seeing two children on that horse Polly had left so unexpectedly.

Polly held him at arm's length to look at him. His great hat had fallen to the ground, so that his black hair stirred in the wind. "I think maybe I'm not goin' to mind the beard. It's so nice and black it makes your eyes look bluer."

She laughed at herself. "I guess though I'd like you even if you'd growed a wart on your nose."

"Your laugh is still the same," Tim said, and looked off over her head to the horse to keep from seeing again how much he did mean to her, yes and how much she meant to him in spite of everything—time and distance—and—Lovie.

Tim knew now that there were two children on that horse clinging there to the sidesaddle, and the one in front had started raising such a howl Tim couldn't hear himself think.

"Oh," Polly said, "let me go! What a mother! Run off this way. Good thing that horse wasn't fractious."

She ran to the horse and took the crying child down in her arms and started making mother sounds to it.

"That can't be little Timmy, can it?" Tim stood awkwardly staring at her. This baby was almost exactly the size and age of Emmie's boy. Why he'd figured it out that Timmy would be almost three and a half and should be—

Then suddenly, as if struck by a powerful vertigo, Tim saved himself from reeling by clutching his fingers in the horse's mane.

Harmony Blankinship had another baby too. Such a thought had never entered his mind—that Polly could be a—bitch. God—he'd come back to this from Lovie. He wished his pap could see just what he was looking at, his married wife, mother of his own Timmy, quieting this second child, not so young as Harmony's maybe, but as much a bastard. And Polly as brazen as Harmony as she kissed the child and fondled it back to slow contentment.

"Pap?"

Tim heard it twice before he could take his horrified gaze from the woman he had married.

"You are my pap?" It was the other boy on the horse.

Tim still clung to the horse's mane and stuck out his other hand. The boy was large for his age, he was sitting on a piece of rag carpet behind the saddle, his sturdy legs pressed forward so he wouldn't kick the horse's flanks.

"Timmy?"

"Ma didn't say you had a black beard, but she did say when you came she'd be so tickled to see you she'd forget everythin' else."

Tim caught this little boy who was so old for his age in his arms and lifted him off the horse. "And she shore did! Forgot her little boy Timmy."

"I'm not little." He was already wriggling to free himself from the confinement of Tim's arms. "Arnett's little, but I'm big."

"Sure you're big," Polly's eyes twinkled at Timmy, "so big your pap didn't know you, any more than he knew Arnett."

Tim set his son back on the horse behind the saddle. The happiness in Polly's eyes was not real. Guilt showed through, Tim thought.

"Ain't you goin' to say somethin' about this fine big boy?"

Polly was looking at the child in her arms, trying to coax a smile to his stubbornly offended lips. He still sobbed when he drew a deep breath. He was a little thin, with big, sad, blue eyes, and now a jutting underlip.

Tim did not put out his hands. He had them tightly knotted in his pockets, hitching up his heavy belt—the belt that carried all he'd gained for two years out of his life for this!

"Look, Arnie, that's your pap, come back from Californy. I bet he's got a surprise for you in his pocket."

"Did you bring me some gold?" Timmy asked. "That would be about as good as the pony Grandpa is goin' to give me when I'm six if I don't ever kick my mammy's horse in the flanks."

"Fine." Tim wondered how they could end this scene.

"Timothy, Arnett's shy, but maybe if you've got somethin' like a knife, he'll come to you," Polly urged.

But Tim made no move to take his hands from his pockets. By God, if she thinks she can talk this little bastard away she's mistaken. I'll take Timmy and go back to Lovie. It might be hard on Lonesome to make the whole trip again, but it wouldn't be any harder than plowin'. And Harmony's money too! I've earned every blasted cent, riskin' my hide! Be damned if I'll be a hero or a simpleton and have the whole country feel sorry for me, or laugh. This little Arnie! Who could be his pa? Not Drew? Who else! Lord. A man's own brother. Them big blue eyes, narrow mouth, too pretty to be a boy.

He'd be glad to see them both—no, all three of them dead—dead.

"Timothy Taylor Larkin." Polly was suddenly five feet two of fury. "Do you aim to stand there and make no move to acknowledge this child? He's as much yours as Timmy, only you wasn't here to go fetch old Barbary Bolton to tie his cord. I was jist headin' for your ma's to stay all night, but since you'll probably be headin' the same way, I guess I'd better take your young uns and go back where them and me is still considered decent."

"Ain't we goin' to Grandma Larkin's?" Timmy asked, his fine face breaking into a scowl.

"No, and don't you tune up to cry," Polly snapped. "You can at least help me back on this horse, Timothy Larkin."

Arnett wouldn't loosen his hold on her neck enough to let her put him on the front of the saddle.

Tim felt cheap before Polly, but he wasn't going to let her bluff him into accepting that baby.

"How old is he?" Tim was looking her straight in the eye.

Her smooth white forehead looked cold, but her gray eyes blazed at him, and the line of her mouth was tight across her teeth, so tight that the color had gone from her lips until they looked as if she might be having a chill.

"How old is he!" Polly echoed his words. "Figure it out for yourself. Lackin' three weeks he was born nine months after you left. You've been knowin' me since I was six years old and you could stand there and with a look and arms tight to your sides you could put me in a class with Harmony Blankinship. I guess I made a mistake askin' God to bring you home."

"Polly." Timothy hurt all over. There wasn't a hair of his head or beard that seemed left out of this hurting. It was as if he'd been dropped into a barrel of scalding water preparatory to being scraped, and then had been yanked out to stand naked in a sharp wind. "Polly!" He had remembered she had a temper, but not this high.

At the sound of his second ejaculation Polly burst out crying and put out her small hand to touch him, thought better of it, or gave up hope, and let herself and the clinging baby sink down in a heap beside the road.

"Oh, Timothy, I've thought all these months how proud you'd be when you heard about this baby. And he's been such a mortal comfort to me in my lonesomeness."

She kissed the baby fiercely.

The matter of Polly's melting had been so sudden that Tim had to steel himself against kneeling there beside her. She's

such a sweet little thing and so fierce and lovin' all at once. She had no right to use her power over him by tears this way. He wouldn't say he was sorry. He wouldn't even say he hadn't meant to be so hard. He would go talk to his ma before he would make any decision—whether to burn his bridges and run or lick boots.

"I'll ride back with you to your house," Tim said from his lofty position, "and see your folks, since it's so close. Then I'll borrow your horse and ride on over to see Ma by myself."

Tim hardly recognized his own voice aloud in its huskiness. Polly was young, he thought—less than twenty-two. He reached down to help Polly to mount the horse again. He wouldn't touch that child except where he had to grab him back when he jumped with fear.

Little Timmy's face was drawn in the same fear now, and Timothy was further horrified by the close resemblance between the children when their faces were set in unnatural lines.

"I could take Timmy on my mule with me, if you'd let him go."

"All right," Polly sounded as if nothing had happened.

Tim knew she was making up her mind that none of this should be suspected at home. Polly's pride wouldn't let her go about making a ruckus.

"Timmy, wouldn't you like to ride with your pap on his fine white mule?"

"No."

Tim was ashamed for his part in the scene that had brought disappointment to his son's face, and yet he was still hot and cold with fury.

"I'll bet he's brought you somethin' really nice from California," she wheedled.

Tim knew it wasn't just sympathy for him that made Polly beg, but more her fear of how it would look to the Arnetts.

"We could run a race," Polly said.

Timmy held out his arms to his father.

And so the Larkin family came riding into the Arnett yard when Jemima, Polly's little sister, burst out of the house shouting, her dark curls sticking straight out as she ran, "Oh, Tim, Tim, did you get any gold?"

She had grown so much that Tim wouldn't have recognized her any place else. He got off the mule and suffered himself to be embraced, his beard pulled, his hat dragged off his head by the young woman that he'd been shamed for, even if he'd been her own brother, much less just one by law.

"Ain't he handsome and desperate-lookin' with that beard?" Jemima said, standing with her hands on her hips and her chest thrust forward as if she wanted him to be even more conscious of that chest's sudden change. "I just wish Pa had met you in the yard or sommers to see if he'd-a reco'nized you. He said you'd have to come to him. He broke his crutch and is not gettin' around so good while Wes is takin' it down to the blacksmith shop to be fixed."

Polly got off at the stile block without assistance and handed her bridle to one of the pickaninnies that had run out.

By now the yard began to fill with Negroes and whites eager to welcome Tim, who smiled and called them all by name, to their great pleasure. Tim wondered at his ability to live up to Polly's pride. There were Polly's two brothers that were younger, who ran to inspect the mule and duffel, and her mother in her third best lilac silk cap and drawn-work white apron.

"Well, well, Timothy." She came forward across the yard like a duchess. She still walked as straight as the first day Tim had seen her. Only her face and hair had aged. "I must admit I nevah expected to see you back. You do look kind of peaked. Probably nothin' wrong with you that good victuals and a round of pu'gative can't cure." She still slurred over her r's so that nobody could doubt that she had come from Kentucky blue-grass country.

"You look mighty well, ma'm," Tim said. "T'd-a reco'nized

you in the moonlight anywhere, but Jemima here has about growed out of sight."

"Oh, Tim!" Mima flounced. She was prettier than Polly had ever been, and she had tricks with her eyes and shoulders. (In some places she'd be called a hussy. Tim wondered if anyone else had ever thought as much.) "I s'pose next thing you'll be sayin' that I got a calf to my leg—and—well you can guess what your ma said when she last saw me."

"Mima!" Mrs. Arnett pulled her mouth down. "The difference between a colt and a filly isn't so much; you just have to watch the filly fo' ideas! Polly! put that young one down or give him to Tim to hold."

"He's kind of shy," Polly hurried to say before she handed Arnett over to one of the Negro women, who blew on his neck and made him cackle out with the first show of happiness Tim had seen from him.

"Shy! It's a wise child! But do hurry in, Tim, Jamie is goin' to be frothin' at the mouth if we don't get in theah with you."

Tim followed his strange mother-in-law into the big hall. Mima was clinging to one of his arms, Timmy to the fingers of his other hand. "Seems to me this hall has shrunk up since the first time I seen it."

"That would be before my time?" Mima turned her head to look up into Tim's face.

"No, I guess you was about six weeks old." Tim looked at her hard. "Hollered all while we ate dinner because your ma wouldn't spoil her company dinner to come feed you. One of the niggers tried to keep you out of earshot, but you had good lungs."

"Still have," Mima shouted.

"Mima!"

It was her pap this time who gently called her down.

"Mighty glad to see you, Tim." Old Man Arnett sat beside the great fireplace, a rug over his legs. His large head with the fringe of dark brown hair going gray should have been on even

larger shoulders, above long powerful legs, but to those who knew him he was just right.

Tim freed himself from Mima and Timmy to go clasp the old man's hands, which were tough and hard, unlike the hands you would expect on an invalid. Mr. Arnett made beautiful things from leather; shoes and saddles and fancy cases.

"Mighty good to see you too, sir. I got money to pay you back and enough to buy about a section of land." Tim said it without even giving a thought to Harmony Blankinship or the possibility that tomorrow he might take out for Lovie with little Timmy before him on the mule.

"That's mighty fine, Timothy. Mighty fine. You look good from the top of your head to the soles of them interestin' boots you're wearin'. Pull up a chair for him, Mima."

"Why, Pa, he'd ought to pull up a chair for me!" Mima pouted, her smooth round chin down. "He says himself he wouldn't-a reco'nized me, I'm such a lady."

"Well, then git yourself a chair, Tim, and maybe this young lady will act like one and quit hangin' onto you like she was twelve o' fou'teen instead of two yea's oldah," Mrs. Arnett said.

Polly had gone behind her father's chair so that he couldn't look into her face when he said, "Little Polly here has sure counted the days. Mighty happy now, Pussy?" He reached up and patted her hand that rested on his shoulder. "What do you think of this fine boy she's got to show for her time?"

Tim felt even his forehead grow hot as he stammered, "Mighty fine."

"Timmy here is goin' to have a pony if he don't kick his mammy's horse in the flank one of these days and git her bucked off. Timmy's mighty big and smart for his age."

Timmy came forward and leaned against his grandfather's knees, his blue eyes puzzled. "You like Arnie, don't you, Gram-pa?"

"Of course he does," Polly bent and kissed her father's high

forehead. "And you can come with me to get your pap a *big* piece of Charlotte's cake."

"I'll git it for him," Mima said.

"You bring me my tobacco, Mima," her father's voice was firm this time.

Mima flounced to the mantel and brought the canister with the hound's head for a nob.

"Smoke, Tim?"

"I'd ortn't to take the time. I 'low Ma's been waitin' fer me as anxious as anybody, and if Polly is gettin' that cake— How's Ma been?"

"I'd say she'd probably changed less than anybody you left," Mr. Arnett said. "Remarkable woman."

"Maybe I'd-a been remarkable if I'd waited for you sixteen years instead of waitin' on you, Jamie." There was strange tenderness edged with jealousy in Mrs. Arnett's tone.

Just then Polly came in behind Timmy, who was carrying the cake so carefully Tim was pained for him.

"Polly, why don't you and Tim go off alone to Mrs. La'kin's," Polly's mother said. "We could keep the children here tonight. Timmy could sleep in the boys' room like he was growed out of a trundle bed."

"But Tim's mule is about wore out, and I'd offered my horse," Polly said firmly. "I think maybe his ma would like to see him just by herself."

"You don't aim to go off down there to your ma's without first showin' us your gold, do you?" Mima begged. "And surely you got somethin' fer us special."

"Mimal!" It was Polly this time.

"Yes, I guess you're right, Mima," Tim stood up and hitched at his belt. "You git the boys to go fetch my duffel bag an' I'll unpack it right here if you'll give me leave, Mrs. Arnett."

"I suppose the front room ain't a place for unpackin' duffels that has been half-way round the world," Mrs. Arnett said, "but

I guess I'd trust it in my front room sooner than in my bedroom with what it might have picked up."

While Mima was after the duffel, Tim walked up to the fireplace, unbuttoned his shirt, and took off his money belt. He handed it to Mr. Arnett.

"Oh, Jamie, let me lift it." Mrs. Arnett came across the room. "Why it's still wa'm from his body." She took her hand away quickly as if she had made an indelicate gesture.

Polly and Timmy came back with the cake.

"Sure it's warm! It's been next to me for almost three months, and you wrap four, five pounds, countin' the belt, around your waist for that time, and it's apt to get het up."

"Yes—apt." Mrs. Arnett went back to her chair. "Only four pounds to a woman around her middle wouldn't even show."

Tim never quite knew whether to laugh or act as if he didn't hear when his mother-in-law grew frankly bawdy, because her words were never up to her silk cap and her ways.

Tim opened the end of the belt and shook out some coins in his mother-in-law's lap.

"Laws a mercy!"

"Real gold!" There was hunger and longing in Mr. Arnett's voice, a jealousy that seldom showed. To Tim it was as if his father-in-law had said, "Why couldn't I have got that?"

Tim hurried to say, "It wasn't fun to get it. It was plumb back-breakin' heart-squeezin'—"

And then at last Timmy couldn't stand for another minute being neglected with his offering of cake. He dropped it in the middle of his grandmother's second best rug and burst out crying.

Tim turned to his son. Tim wished it hadn't happened, but he blamed Polly for not reminding him of the cake. Why had she let the little young un stand there waiting while his pap completely forgot him, and here was an awful mess on the rug—yellow cake with custard and hickory nut filling. And Timmy with his head buried in his grandma's lap among the gold pieces.

Mrs. Arnett was shouting for Charlotte to come with the dustpan and a damp cloth and maybe some camphor gum and a turkey wing brush.

Tim didn't wait for somebody else this time. He lifted Timmy in his arms and walked over to a chair beside the window.

"Don't cry, Timmy; you thought your pap thought more of them pieces of yaller stuff than he did of you?" He could feel the little boy's sobs shake him. "What's gold anyhow but some-thin' to buy nice things for Pap's little boy."

"I ain't *little*," Timmy bawled.

"Pap's big boy."

But Timmy was trying to get away.

Out of the corner of his eye Tim could see that Polly was very busy clearing up the mess, holding the bigger pieces of china and laying the smaller pieces on.

A man shouldn't ever be away from his family so long, Tim thought. He wanted to stand up in the big light room and shout at all of them to leave him be until he'd made up his mind about something. He wanted to grab his money belt. He felt somehow naked without its weight dragging at his hips. He wanted to get out and away.

"Where the thunder has Mima gone with that duffel?"

Tim stood up and let Timmy run to hide his head against his grandma. They'd made a bawling baby out of his son. This wasn't a proper homecoming even for a heathen.

Tim stalked into the hall and then shouted back, "Take out eleven of them coins, and we'll say we're square."

"Only ten, Timothy. You only borried two hundred dollars," Mr. Arnett said calmly. "You'll need that extry twenty when it comes to gittin' started housekeepin'."

Mima and the boys came in with the duffel. It seemed they had spilled half of it out in the yard because they unfastened the wrong end first.

"I'm certainly glad that cake wasn't on my best rug," Mrs. Arnett fussed.

Tim walked over, took the money belt from her, shook out another coin, and holding it between his thumb and finger as if it were a reading glass, "For damages," he said with an insulting firmness.

Polly gasped, but her tongue was never slower than Tim's. "Oh that's fine. Then, Ma, could we have this little rug for our best one?"

Now Mrs. Arnett, so taken down, gasped, "We'll see, we'll see." She fumbled the coin as if she were still embarrassed by its warmth.

In such an atmosphere Tim passed out his gifts like a grudging, slim Santa Claus. He had hoped it would be pleasurable to see Polly weep and laugh over the cameo locket with the place in the back for a wisp of hair, but she just took it calmly and held it up to her throat for them all to see, and then ran out of the room to get her scissors. Mima did have a proper spell over her ring with the set of a small gold nugget, though she thought she'd like a locket like Polly's better. His mother-in-law was properly proud of her ear bangles. The boots for Timmy were almost too small so that his grandpa had to pull off his heavy yarn stockings before putting them on, and explain to him he could stretch the boots to the right size. There was no present for little Arnie, which worried Timmy. At last Tim took out the little bag of pure washed gold that he'd brought just to show, and promised he'd give Arnie some of that when Arnie was big enough to know better than to eat it. In the bottom of the duffel, rolled in a tight, round pasteboard holder, was a blue shawl for his ma. He only let them look at the end of it, for fear he could never get it back into the holder.

It was growing dark when at last Tim mounted his home-made saddle on Polly's horse and headed fast for his ma's place. Polly's horse could not run fast enough to outdistance Tim's banshees. They were thundering about him gnashing at his consciousness like wild horses at their blood enemies.

Polly could lie, and her whole family would keep up the show because they were so proud. Well, Tim thought, he wasn't proud, and if that kid was Drew's he could have it *and* Polly and welcome while *he*, Tim, took his son and left them to their sin. (Somehow that word sin didn't set right.) It was worse than sin to steal your brother's wife while he was away trying to gouge out a stake—almost with his bare hands.

Oh, Tim knew he had a case all right. He'd heard of women caught in similar cases who would do something to bring on a birth a little sooner, say three or four weeks! That would make the difference between illegitimacy and wedlock.

And Lovie might be married to somebody else before he could get back. Tim felt shrunken before that thought, so he went back to Drew and Polly. Drew loved her enough all right. And that baby wasn't any seventeen months old, if he was fifteen he was doing well. He didn't have the spunk of an older baby.

Sweat was tightening Tim's hat band. He wished he had a faster horse. He had to see his ma.

They were at supper when Tim pounded up, because the candles were all on the table. He wished he had come by day, so he wouldn't give his ma the shock he'd seen so many times, when her face had lighted up until she looked almost thirty-five again, expecting her Patrick to come bursting through the door for her. The sudden hands to her hair, then to her collar, and last to see that her apron was straight, then the draining of all youthfulness from her face as the door opened and she realized it wasn't her boys' pap who'd come to find her after all these years.

But tonight there would be something to make up to her for her expectation—her boy coming home. So Tim ran up the path shouting, "Ma, Perry, Drew." The last name caught his throat, and Timothy Larkin knew at last that he was sobbing in his awful longing and need for his ma. Twenty-five years old and here he couldn't talk for choking with joy at seeing his ma again.

But she was crying too, and it didn't matter, for the other two boys weren't in the room to see. And Tim had seen that the expectant look had not flowed from his mother's eyes at sight of him but had stayed while she cried out, "Timmy, Timmy."

"You haven't eat up all the supper, have you?" Tim said when he could speak. "I'm hungry near to starvation."

"You know they's always victuals on the hearth."

How well he knew that.

"Go wash your hands, and I'll have them up for you in no time."

Her voice had the richness of the Scotch, but just now and then did she roll an r.

He sat down across from her and once again saw the play of candlelight upon a beautiful woman. At this moment Tim thought he had never seen his mother so fair. Her skin was rosy from bending over the fire, and in the candlelight she looked much less than fifty. Her teeth had stayed white, and her blue eyes looked as if they had never been strained over a needle or a darning ball, though she knitted enough to "sock and mitten" her boys. But as always it was her hair that set her off. She wore it fluffed in two rolls on each side of her forehead and drawn back to a knot as big as her two fists, and it shone in the candlelight, the soft, polished copper color that Lovie's would probably be when she was fifty.

Tim got up and brought the shawl from the pocket of his coat. He opened the box and told her to pull the end. It really looked like magic to see her pull the blue cashmere shawl from the slim baton of cardboard.

"Oh, Timmy, it's too beautiful for me. It's more like somethin' Mrs. Arnett would wear, or Polly. Hit's the color of the north sky on certain days, Timothy, a blue that I've never found a word for."

Tim felt happier than he'd felt since the day he'd fished with Lovie.

His ma put the shawl around her shoulders and sat down to watch him eat.

Tim felt repaid for bringing the gifts. He had struggled with himself when he bought them, they took so much of his money, and for every dollar and a quarter he spent he was thinking of an acre of land, growing corn, fattening hogs to be turned into money to create an estate about which he would not have to be ashamed before the Arnetts.

"Tell me everything, Timmy; don't leave out a word," she smiled at him. Her eyes were the kind that looked at you when she talked. Right at you, into your eyes, so that you felt stirred by her interest and concern. Not like Mrs. Arnett, down the buttons of your shirt, across your shoulders, up over your hair, and down to your boots while she was saying, "Nice weather we'ah havin'."

"There ain't so much to tell, and yet so much that I'll probably be takin' the rest of my lifetime and yours to tell it." Ma was the one person in the world with whom Tim felt entirely at ease. Words came quick for him when she listened. He told her of the amount of money, and took off his belt for her to count it while he ate the cooked-down sausage and dried beans with corn dodgers to dip in the pot liquor.

"Didn't you bring none of the rough ore?"

"I knew you'd ask that, and before you ask the other question let me guess what it's goin' to be." He took out the bag of pure gold and handed it across to her. "You're goin' to ask me with your heart in your mouth did I have to kill ary man to git it, and I'm goin' to say no, but I wish I had."

Minerva Larkin laughed the way her boys had loved to hear her. "Tim, the only way you've changed is to git so pore your carcass couldn't make a cake of soap big enough to wash little Arnie's head."

It was as if his ma had belted him across the shoulders. She must have recognized the change in his face, because she asked

him quick if he hadn't come past Arnetts' on the way and if he'd seen little Arnie and the rest.

"Yes, I seen 'em all," he looked down at his plate and wiped up the last of the bean juice with the last of the corn dodger.

His mother didn't go on talking. She slowly pushed her chair away from the table after she'd poured the pure gold back into the little sack and drawn the string. "Timothy Taylor Larkin, there's somethin' on your mind that's got no right to be there."

Tim laid down his knife and fork. Here too in his ma's house, the only place he had found real comfort, something was going to happen to spoil it. He couldn't look straight at his ma but looked off into the corner of the room where a string of dried corn hung, tied by the shucks in bunches to look like a decoration until the ears were ready to be shelled.

"You're not goin' to set there and tell me you was suspicious of Polly?"

Tim still couldn't answer. He felt like a little boy caught stealing or swearing before a preaching man.

She came around the table and pushed Tim's plate and cup back so she could lean against the table and look down into Tim's eyes.

"Look here, son, I'm your ma, and if I thought by givin' you the last breath I got in my body I could save you, I'd do it. But if you set there stubborn and hardheaded over the innocent little boy of yourn and Polly's, I'll be the first one to tell Polly's two older brothers where they can find you to give you the horsewhippin' you deserve. Polly ain't ever looked at another man, but to see that he walks on two legs, maybe, since the first time she set eyes on you and offered you a ride on her little pony. Why I'd be the first to strip the hide off any man that doubted Polly Arnett, strip it and hang it to the tallest thorny locust tree in hog holler."

She wasn't in a frenzy. Her words came with slow solemnity, like preaching.

"You go out there and git on that horse and ride for all your

worth to the Arnett house and ask Polly to forgive you for bein' such a fool, and pray the Lord on your way to make you worthy of such a woman. Polly near give her life for that young un last winter when he had pneumony—wouldn't lēave anybody else to take care of him—sayin' she couldn't look you in the face when you come home if she'd let him die."

Minerva put her hands on Tim's head and tilted his face up to hers. "Look me in the eye, Timmy. I ain't ever lied to you, have I?"

Tim had his arms about his mother's waist, his head on the blue shawl on her shoulder, "I believe *you*, Ma. I do—but——"

"Son," Minerva said quietly, "when you marry your choice you figger so doubt won't ever get a morsel of comfort from your bed or board. That's what marriage is, and trust comes first."

Tim wasn't in the habit of praying, and yet he prayed that his ma would never have to know how false her trust had been.

When he reached Arnetts', the family and slaves were at prayers.

He came into the big room where the black people stood to listen and the family sat about in their favorite chairs while Old Man Arnett read from the big Bible that lay on the tip-top table before him.

"'And ye answered me, and said, The thing which thou hast spoken is good for us to do. So I took the heads of your tribes, wise men, and known, and made them heads over you, captains of thousands, and captains of hundreds, and captains of fifties and captains of tens, and officers, according to your tribes.'"

Mr. Arnett paused in his reading to say to Wes, "Git Mr. Timothy a chair beside his wife."

Tim felt embarrassed, almost as if he and Polly were standing up before the crowd to be married again.

Polly tried to smile at him, but her lips and eyes seemed stiff from too long hiding what she felt.

Mima grinned at him and clasped her hands together as if shaking hands.

Mr. Arnett continued, "It's from the first chapter of Deuteronomy, Timothy. 'And I charged your judges at that time saying: Hear the causes between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother, and the sojourner with him. Ye shall not respect persons in judgment; ye shall hear the small and the great alike; ye shall not be afraid of the face of man; for the judgment is God's: and the cause that is too hard for you ye shall bring unto me, and I will hear it. And I command you at that time all the things which ye should do.'"

Mr. Arnett put his finger on the page and looked around the group. He read again, "' . . . for the judgment is God's: and the cause that is too hard for you ye shall bring unto me, and I will hear it.'"

It sounded to Tim as if Jamie Arnett were God himself reading, and that the slaves were the ones to whom the words were spoken.

"For the judgment is God's; and the cause that is too hard for you ye shall bring unto me."

But Tim knew he couldn't tell Old Man Arnett about Harmony Blankinship's money, or how he felt about Lovie or his pap. And then as if he were having an experience such as old women told about in camp meetings, Tim Larkin knew that God already knew, so he wouldn't have to tell.

Old Man Arnett kept slaves, he worked them hard, fed them well, yet often ruled them like a stern father. Old Man Arnett probably had been a better man because he was crippled. He hadn't decided when he was a little boy to be the most honest and best man around; that disease had probably made him be good just as Tim's pap, a sinner himself, had driven Tim away from the same kind of sin.

Tim looked at Mr. and Mrs. Arnett and Polly; how much of their goodness was from choice? If things had turned out dif-

ferent, Old Lady Arnett might have run a fancy brothel in New Orleans. Tim grew amused by his imaginings.

Old Man Arnett had sure prospered for his goodness. Accumulated a lot in spite of being crippled, in spite of having to ride over his place in a specially made saddle, that his man, Wes, had lifted him into. How had he prospered in spite of being near helpless? How, unless by special aid from heaven? All right. From now on out Tim Larkin would prosper!

Tim would go further than to read the Bible every day. He'd go a long ways further than that. He'd give the highest acre of ground on the farm that he would buy. The very highest to the Lord for a church house and burying ground, and the Lord would know that his intentions were right—toward Harmony Blankinship and all men, and the Lord would cause him to prosper.

He reached over under cover of Mr. Arnett's prayer and squeezed Polly's hands until she almost jumped.

"And make us all worthy and dutiful servants in thy dwelling place here on earth and at last take us home to a blessed and peaceful rest in Jesus' name. Amen."

Tim knew why Mr. Arnett didn't mention the fact to the Lord by way of gratitude for the return of a traveler: Mr. Arnett's prayers were repeated from rote.

"It's nice you come back," Polly's voice was as brittle as the first skiff of ice on a pond. "Did your ma send you?"

Tim's face felt hot, but he drove out the words, "She told me about little Arnie's sickness." He simply could not bring himself to say he was sorry. He knew he could not go through life beside Polly if he had to belittle himself in the first place by begging forgiveness. He saw she wasn't wearing his locket, so changed the subject by asking her why.

"I thought I'd better be sure some of little Arnie's hair wouldn't burn a sinful hole in it."

Polly looked so independent that Tim wanted to grab her by

the shoulders and shake some sense into her. He would have too, if all her people hadn't been crowding around to hear more about California. He did say through his teeth, "I wish you'd put yourself in my place. I bet there ain't another man in the world that wouldn't-a made the same mistake." And that was as near as he ever aimed to come to telling her he was sorry.

They went upstairs with Tim carrying the candle and Polly going ahead to lead to the right room.

"Ma made Mima move her things after you went to your ma's," Polly whispered as she closed the door and stood with her back pressed against it.

Tim set the candle on the cherry chest and went to look down into the trundle bed. Timmy lay on his back, his legs and arms flung out, but Arnett lay like a slim little animal, tightly curled for warmth. All at once it seemed Tim heard his mother singing, "Oh, love come back to me." He was never sure that her song had been her own, or taught to her by somebody long ago, but now the words were his. They tightened his throat and stung his eyes. He knew Polly deserved better than a duty life. She'd borne him two sons—begot in love—it wasn't her fault that these two years had taken him to Lovie.

"Ain't they handsome little fellers?" The very tenderness in her voice hurt Tim worse than her sarcasm of earlier in the evening. "And to think their mother and father stand over their bed and feel that they're strangers."

Tim laid his arm about Polly's shoulders. "After all these years, my ma still keeps lookin' for Pa."

"I've always wished till today that he'd come back."

"Why not now?" Tim asked her.

Polly hid her face in her hands to cry. "Oh, Tim, this has been such a day!"

Polly seemed too frail in his arms. Tim suddenly knew that all her unconcern had been put on to shield her pride. That minute he'd have given all his gold, or at least half of it, to be

able to wipe clean her memory of the scene in the road this afternoon.

"Oh, I mustn't cry! You'll never love me again. Can't you remember, Tim, that I'm not the kind to cry?"

Tim picked her up and carried her to the big bed and laid her gently on the puffed feathers, and sat down beside her, holding both her hands. He wished he could tell her that he hadn't changed. That he'd never had a thought of another woman the whole time away. He'd never been a good liar, and he knew he couldn't fool Polly. Her high, white forehead, her mouth that changed so easily from serious to gay had been too long held in a tight line to keep her chin steady. Even so she wouldn't believe what was not true, no matter how honeyed his words.

And then he heard himself saying aloud, "Love you again? Why Polly, I ain't *ever* stopped lovin' you. Day in day out."

Lovie Romines was, in that moment, changed back into the dream he had imagined her that day as he led Lonesome through the timber, and she had stood before him in the path all spangled with gold coins of late winter sunlight.

"But, Tim, I can't believe it's all really ours, and you've still enough money to buy housekeepin' things that will be mine," Polly said as she rode beside Tim over a country lane. "Ma says she'll give me her set of blue dishes that's got only the soup plates and some cups broke and a brand-new roll of rag carpet and a feather bed."

Tim hardly heard her. The house was such a small part of this farm. As it turned out, he couldn't quite get the whole section, because there were two small bites of land out of it, one for twenty-five acres—how anybody could hope to live on such a patch was surely more than Tim could see—and the other for forty.

Tim had been surprised when he learned who owned the forty-acre patch, stubby Zeb Newby! Zeb was the one who had

to pay the teacher with wormy punkins and rusty oats with now and then a pig that looked like he should have died with the wheezes. Poor Zeb.

"I can probably buy them two fellers out sometime and make it a whole section," Tim said as he urged Lonesome into a pace. "That Zeb Newby would be tickled spitless at sight of some real cash."

"But why? Ain't five hundred seventy-five acres enough?" Polly looked healthy today with the sun and wind on her face. "I don't want to be land pore like some of these people."

"We won't be land pore. I aim to farm it all inside of ten years—except a good-sized woods pasture and maybe——"

"Maybe what?" Polly turned to face him. Her horse wasn't such a bold rider as Tim's mule, but to see her sit on any horse with that fancy saddle her pap had made for her, and wearing that blue wool riding habit, any one would look a second time.

Tim knew he was going to find it hard to name it to Polly about the acre up in the hill overlooking the whole farm and miles of countryside.

"Maybe what, Timothy?"

She was going to ask questions, and make argument. Tim cleared his throat. "I don't aim that our boys should grow up heathens."

"Oh, Tim, of course not. We should buy a Bible first thing." Polly acted relieved.

"More than that, Polly."

But just then Polly came in sight of the high wooded hill overlooking the east and west draw that was turning green.

"I'll race you to the top," Polly called. "That's where we got to plant our house."

Tim had a low feeling in the pit of his stomach. Polly was off like a flash of blue and sorrel. He took out after her on Lonesome, but not with much urging, because Lonesome's powerful gallop could outdistance her horse in two minutes. Tim wished he'd given Harmony her two hundred dollars and

let her worry about keeping it away from the horse trader. Then he wouldn't have to argue with Polly about this knob of land that Tim had promised to the Lord. Knelt on it, in fact, and told the Lord He could have it. It had only cost one dollar and twenty-five cents bought along with the rest of the land, but before he convinced Polly that she must live on that other hill he'd feel he'd paid mighty dear for this gift to the Lord.

He overtook Polly just as she ran her horse up in under a pin oak tree and stopped.

"The very spot!" she shouted. "A view in four directions. Nobody could ever slip up on you here to pop you over the head with a tommyhawk."

"No, neither could you ever git out of the wind. And how would you aim to git water up here? And no matter what field you drove into for a day's work you'd always have to save your team for the hard haul home, up this hill to oats and water."

"Tim Larkin, you talk like you knowed I was aimin' to choose this spot so you got all your arguments thought up."

"In a way I have, you see——"

But just then Tim saw someone coming up the hill from the east along the wagon road.

"If there ain't Harmony Blankinship, Tim. She's the most shameless female I've ever knowed."

Tim felt the money belt, there were still eight twenties in it, but eight weren't enough unless Tim had figured on taking part of Harmony's gold for carrying it home, the way the assayer's office did for minting it. Tim actually wished he could pull out the money and thrust it at her and then give up for Polly to live on this high piece of ground. That way the Lord would be released from any kind of a bargain and there'd be no need to keep the dedication.

"Hello Tim and Polly," Harmony waved and drew up her horse. "How do ye like my new horse? Mortie said he was worth seventy-five dollars if a cent, so it wasn't like he was leavin' me with nothin'. If me an the children gits in a pinch for funds we

up and sell the plug. Seein' you struck gold, Tim, I rid over to see how much you'd offer. Polly's ma said you two had come off to look at a piece of land Tim bought—so here I am. Course I'd expect you to let me ride back home and you send one o' Polly's pa's niggers to fetch it." Harmony wasn't breathless; she just stopped to give them time to answer, and for herself to look them over with good-humored curiosity.

"Tim told me he planned to buy mules, when he bought," Polly said with a trace of her mother's loftiness after she had waited for Tim to say something.

"You don't say. This is a mighty good horse, Tim, stout and willin'. Should I git off and let you see if he's pantin' after this climb?"

"No. But what did you mean about Mortie leavin'?" Tim asked.

Polly looked sharply at her husband.

"He's decided to take his string of horses to Westport Landin' to see if he couldn't sell 'em to emigrants to Californy and maybe git a job like you did of drivin' a team or bein' a scout. He's plumb got gold fever since seein' you yisterday mornin'."

Tim wished he could get Harmony to hush up. Why hadn't he told Polly from the first that he drove by there with a message from Blank?

"Seein' Tim?"

"Yes, ain't he told you? He come by our place on his way home. Said it was to water his mule." Harmony winked and laughed. "I thought at first he'd come by sypin' for Blank, but I couldn't convince Mortie hit was for either of them reasons. Mortie denies that's why he's leavin', but he hadn't said nothin' about leavin' till Tim come blowin' in."

Polly's face had grown pale and her hands were gripping the fanny horns on her sidesaddle.

Tim wished he had the forty dollars he'd paid for the thirty-two acres right around the spot where they were standing. He'd simply hand over the whole two hundred dollars to Harmony

and get her off his conscience, but he'd signed papers and paid for this land. It was going to be in his name and he'd promised the Lord that he'd make it up to Harmony Blankinship some better way.

"I might be able to see my way to give you fifty for that plug, Harmony," Tim said getting off his mule, "but you realize it's for Blank's sake."

"Oh, I couldn't think of takin' less than sixty," Harmony said with one of her plumpest smiles. "Course Mortie is not too careful of what he thinks—which don't matter—it's what he says that makes the difference."

Out of the tail of his eye Tim could see that Polly looked as if she'd been turned to rock salt. Why he couldn't say to Harmony, "Get the hell out of here on Mortie's plug and don't cast a shader on a foot of this land the rest of your mortal days!" But instead he looked into the plug's mouth and offered Harmony fifty-five dollars if she'd swear that Mortie was out of the country and "wouldn't get ary cent of it."

"Oh, he's gone all right. Left before sunup this mornin'." Harmony rolled her big light-blue eyes. "Fifty-five dollars would just about see to me gittin' in a crop."

"How will you do it without a horse?" Polly's voice sounded big coming from such a little woman.

"Oh my neighbors have allus been generous with their work. But, Tim, aire ye goin' to pay me now?"

"No, not till I'm sure Mortie is gone," Tim said, looking Harmony straight in the eye and tempering his tone with a smile.

Tim saw Polly stiffen and pull her horse around to look off in another direction, and Tim knew how suggestive of wickedness his words had been. Why couldn't Polly take him on trust? Imagine wanting Mortie Linders' castoff. Though Harmony was a comely woman; a trace more yellow in her skin and hair and she might look a little like Lovie.

"Well, I'll be countin' on you bringin' over the fifty-five

some time today or tomorrow and bringin' back the horse."

"I'll send," Tim said firmly. Was he fixing to be deviled the rest of his life by Harmony Blankinship? And suppose Blank should come back some day and expose him for a thief and a fraud? Maybe by then he could have saved two hundred dollars to give to Blank, saying he'd found Harmony living as she shouldn't—in open sin—even nursing the result! And he couldn't see the thief who'd stole Blank's wife profiting by Blank's gold.

"Remember!" Harmony made sheep's eyes at him. "Good-by, Polly, I got to be gittin' back to my little boy."

"Timothy Larkin," Polly's eyes were blazing at him, "if you don't git on that mule and show me where you *are* amind to build us a house. And don't forget you are a family man with a wife and two boys of your own, I'll——"

"Never mind, Polly," Tim grinned at her.

"But I do mind." Polly's gray eyes looked black. "And who wouldn't? Imagine what Ma and Mina will say when they hear you stopped by Harmony Blankinship's first! And if they'd knowed what you'd inferred about me! Tim Larkin, I wish I despised you as much as you deserve."

"Now, Polly!" Tim wished Harmony Blankinship had had a harelip or a set of smallpox scars instead of dimples and a pair of eyes that could nearly talk of themselves.

He surely did hate to have Polly so mad at him. He tried to soften her wrath with kindly looks.

"Tim Larkin, there's somethin' else you've got to quit. When you talk to any woman you do it! You look at her just like you was sayin' to yourself, 'Ain't you just right?' Even Mima. You've got her tellin' that little Percy Downing that she won't go to a play party with him till he can grow a beard like yours."

Tim almost raised the animals from the woods with his laughter. He went over to Polly and put his hands on her slim waist. "Just tell me, Mrs. Larkin, why I'd be shinin' up to these second-rate females when I already got the pick?"

Polly leaned over and took Tim by the ears. "You're doin' it now to me! Lookin' at me just the way your ma does—right straight at me—into my eyes, until I can't endure it another minute if you don't reach over and kiss me. And I'm your wife, Tim. What if you do that to me?"

"Ain't it kind of queer I didn't know that before?" Tim was laughing at her. He reached up and kissed her mouth.

"Yes, kind of!" Polly let herself be kissed and then sat up very straight. "Tim, you *do* love me?"

Tim's eyelids were low over his dashing blue eyes. He shook his head. "Only enough to go clear to Californy and back with gold enough to buy a farm so's you won't have to be ashamed! But you don't love me enough to trust me out of sight with a woman that's too cheap, and besides too fat."

Polly's arms were around his neck. "Oh, Tim, the very Devil is in you sometimes, but I guess I got to put up with him. Let's walk and find the place you've made your choice for our house."

Tim lifted Polly from the horse, and they walked together down one hill and halfway up another.

"It will be almost in the center of the farm. To the north, this woods pasture, along this south slope an orchard. We'd only need to clear about fourteen trees out of here to build the house—and the spring will be less than twenty steps from your kitchen. It's not like if the ground was actually hilly—these are just slight rises in ground compared to them south of the river.

"Look off through that gap you'll see the sun and moon set to tell the time of day. And off to the east there ain't nothin' but daylight to stop your view, an' that hill where you first set your heart." Tim paused as if to gather breath for a run up to the top of it, "I'm aimin' to some day build a church and buryin' ground. Maybe by the time the boys are old enough for school they'll go up there to learn."

"A—a church and buryin' ground?" Polly was as if thunder-struck.

"Yes."

"Timothy, look at me. You sure you ain't done somethin' wicked?"

Polly was taking this too serious.

"There ain't a one of us but needs a little forgivin' now and then, and we've mostly found it's easier to ask the Lord to do it than humans. Humans is so confounded long-memoried."

"Tim, I guess even if I wasn't married to you and promised to love you till I die I'd like you, you're so surprisin'. And so right sometimes. Humans are mighty long-memoried."

"Hi, you all down there?"

Tim and Polly turned to see a stubby man coming toward them.

"Zeb Newby!" Tim shouted, "you ain't comin' over here today to try to sell off your place to me?"

"Howdy, Polly. See, Tim ain't changed a bit; allus tryin' to git the jump on somebody." Zeb shook hands with Tim and told him he looked kind of shabby for a millionaire just come from the West.

"Money ain't that easy come by, Zeb," Tim said.

"My old woman kind of thought if I'd go to Californy for gold I'd get a real start," Zeb said. He wrinkled his forehead when he talked. "But I've done decided that there ain't no real chance anywhere in this country for a white man if he ain't some way linked up with money and niggers."

Polly's face grew red. Tim knew she'd heard the story Zeb told around when Polly married Tim, that it was just Tim's way of getting on the inside track with some slave owner.

"There ain't a fair chance in this country no more." Zeb scratched his elbows, took off his hat, and scratched his sandy hair. "I tell my old woman every day we'd all be better off if we was black. That's why I come right over to look you up, Tim. Knowin' your ma don't believe in slavin', I kind of figgered you'd have some work of clearin' and buildin' to do and might hire me when I ain't tied up with my own work."

Tim remembered the way Zeb used to sweep out for the teachers; such a fog of dust and energy it took a couple of hours for things to calm down.

"Sure, Zeb, I'll git somethin' for you to do, but I got to warn you from the start that I don't have much money. I sunk it about all in this land."

Zeb's eyes narrowed in his stubby-featured face. "You probably 'lowed you'd hire Old Man Arnett's niggers cheaper. And maybe on time."

"To be honest, Zeb, that's right."

"Tim Larkin, you're goin' to find you've come home to a different country than you left." Zeb put on his hat and struck off across the hollow toward his home.

"What did he mean, Polly?"

"Oh, nothing, Tim. You know Zeb's always talkin'. It's just the same old thing. Zeb bought this forty acres on time, and he's finding it hard to get the cash for his payments. If he'd stay home and split rail for fences and watch his stock and clear his land he'd be all right."

To Tim, Polly sounded mighty optimistic. Suppose he, Tim Larkin, couldn't hold on to this land?

"You've got more to worry about than Zeb Newby," Polly said with a smug little twist to her mouth. "I didn't tell you sooner because I was afraid you wouldn't bring me out here."

Tim had a moment of horrible imaginings, but calmed himself that it couldn't be very important.

"Do you know why you ain't seen Drew and Perry?"

"Ma didn't say where they was." Tim felt his heart beating hard in his chest.

"I know."

The old jealousy was back again.

"Drew's gone to git Perry out of a scrape with a widow woman. She's fifteen years older than Perry, and Drew's goin' to buy her off."

"Does Ma know?" Tim's relief was as refreshing as a drink of cold water.

"Of course not."

"And that's not all Ma don't know."

"Tim Larkin! You've got to stop bein' so fact-hidin'!" Polly stamped her foot in the fine leather boot that her pa had made. "Here you suddenly get religious, you buy a horse you don't want off of Harmony Blankinship, and then you say when I tell you the most wicked disgrace that could come to your family that it ain't nothin'."

"We're both talkin' too much. Tomorrow I'll come over here with an ax and start workin'. I guess that's what we both need to bend our backs and dig in for sure, but before we git off the subject I'm warnin' you—I ain't goin' to be no hypocrite, prayin' on Sunday and swearin' on Monday. I aim to let somebody else do the prayin'."

"You don't swear much, Tim. Sometimes I wish Pa wouldn't just have to pray learned prayers. And I guess it wouldn't hurt to have to live up to what people thought you was."

"Look here, Polly, you ain't aimin' to kind of hold that church over me?"

"Nothin' of the kind. But ain't we gittin' far ahead? Here we're settin' on the side of the hill practically puttin' colored winder lights in a church when the first stone ain't laid for our own chimley."

"And talkin' about chimleys, would you be content with a fireplace about half as big as that one in your ma's house?"

"Of course, Tim."

"You just put up with little things a while, Polly, but before long we're goin' to have a house that your ma will come in and say, 'My! I wish Jamie could see his way to fixin' a shelf like that for me!'"

Polly got to her feet and shook herself as if she were getting cold. "You sound exactly like Ma. I don't think I've ever knowed anybody as proud as you, Tim."

"And I'm goin' to see that my ma has a set of silk petticoats to wear under a silk dress."

"She'd probably sooner you'd help to git Perry out of this scrape with the widder."

"What kind of a scrape?" Tim really didn't want to know. If he were honest with himself he'd simply forget Perry.

"Oh, not like Harmony! Perry just promised to marry her. Why, she's got a boy sixteen years old."

"Does he live with his ma?" Tim perked up right away.

"I suppose so, but what are you thinkin' of?"

"That would be two hands in one house, and I could git the neighbors to help me throw up an extry cabin, and it would square me with Zeb Newby besides."

"Tim!"

"Well if Perry's gone off and made a fool of hisself he'd ort to abide by it."

"But your ma?"

"She's not such an old petticoat as Drew. Maybe this woman is a right smart worker."

"Tim Larkin, I won't let you do it."

"Now, Polly, Perry's my brother, and if he's fool enough to offer marriage to this woman, I'm goin' to be fool enough to offer him a job. Git on that horse and ride—we'll go by your house to drop you off and then I'll hightail it out for the widder's."

But Drew had worked too fast. When Tim and Polly got back to the Arnetts', there sat the two brothers in the Arnetts' front room being entertained by Mima, who had the good sense to leave when Polly took her arm and led her out.

"Here you been in the country twenty-four hours and ain't seen your own brothers," Drew said as he thumped Tim on the back and wrung his hand. "If I thought a beard would be so becomin' to me, I'd grow one myself."

Tim realized at once that Drew had found it necessary to

strengthen his resolve with several drinks before he got Perry out of this. Drew's face was flushed, and his eyes were too red to have been inflamed by the March wind.

Perry was not quite so tall as the two older brothers, his entire bone structure was lighter, his movements more graceful, his features more pointed. Beside him, Drew looked almost coarse. Where Drew's hair was black and resilient, Perry's was brown and lay smoothly soft on his head. Perry's eyes were gray, with lashes that were almost too heavy; his hands were long and thin, and he reminded you more of brittle icicles in the sun than new tanned leather.

"Glad to see you, Perry," Tim wondered how in the world such a fine, trim fellow as this could belong to Minerva and Patrick. "Did I hear that you went off to fetch a wife?"

Perry's pale cheeks did not turn red; he showed not the least sign of embarrassment. "But I didn't fetch her. Drew figured she had a boy almost as old as me and it might not work out. Good old Drew."

Now Tim knew who little Arnie looked like, and so he didn't offer Perry the job he had rushed over here to offer. Anyway, Perry was probably too light for the heavy work of starting out on a piece of land. Perry had never worked beside his brothers; he'd been too young at first, and somehow managed to find other things to do.

Drew looked at Tim as if he had to have some word of comfort for this piece of unpleasant yet necessary family business. "He'd no place to bring her but to Ma's."

Tim pressed Drew's arm. "I took a wife there and finally decided I'd better go to Californy than let my wife stay."

"Ma would of liked Euphemia," Perry said, "and her fourteen- and sixteen-year-old boys."

"And probably of liked to see you throwed out on your ear by them same boys in less than six months."

Tim wished he had been an orphan with no brothers at all for that moment of conflict. The second day he was home he had

to get into the middle of a family row, and poor old Drew had never got away from it.

"Perry, if you think you can swing an ax and hold a plow in virgin soil, I'll hire you—beginnin' tomorrow," Tim offered. He knew Perry would be too mad to help Drew with the spring work.

"How much you offerin'?"

"Ten dollars a month and your bed and grub."

"Not enough."

"That's my price—but I will throw in this—if at the end of crop season you've saved half of what you've made and have turned out to be good help, I'll see to gittin' a house on my place so you can marry that widder, in case you ain't changed your mind."

Tim held tight to Drew's arm as he talked.

"It's a deal," Perry said with one blighting look at Drew.

Drew gave Tim a look of his old sweet gratitude. Drew ought to be always contented.

"It's time we uns was hurrin' home if Perry aims to get a good night's sleep and over to your place by daylight to start work," Drew said, "but I shore would like to see them young uns o' yourn before I go."

Tim felt guilty, "Oh sure, I'll go call Polly."

Tim went into the kitchen and out to the leather shop before he found Polly and the boys. They were talking to Old Man Arnett as he worked on the handsome little boots Tim had brought Timmy.

"Polly's been tellin' me about your place, Tim," Old Man Arnett paused in his work. "I'm goin' to be mighty proud of you two and these boys."

Tim didn't know what to say. He knew he was a poor father, but he was going to change all of that. "Your Uncle Drew wants to see you."

"Wheel!" Timmy jumped down and bolted off like a runaway colt.

Even shy little Arnie slipped off his mother's lap and pattered away.

Tim wished he didn't hurt so at sight of his own sons.

"I offered Perry a job," Tim told Polly as they left the leather shop, with its clean sharp smell.

"All right, but I do hope he won't get struck on Mima before we're out of the woods with him."

"Mima?" Tim's eyes suddenly became gay. "Oh, she wants a man with a beard like mine."

"And that's just what she can't have!" Polly took his arm in a possessive way that Tim liked. "Tim, did you ever think what an awful pressin' duty it is to be part of a big family?"

"I just got through wishin' I'd been a only child—about one minute."

"And yet you bought five hundred seventy-five acres of ground. Part in Clay County and part in Clinton. Land enough to raise eight or ten children."

"Yes, and would you see that the next one is a little gal baby? I'll just dare anybody to get me away from her over three days at a time so's she can forget me and get attached to somebody else." Tim's voice was grim.

"Poor Timothy. When we get in our house with nobody but just us and the children and maybe Bulah and Polk, it will be different."

"Bulah and Polk?"

"Pa's givin' them to me for my lifetime. Had the papers fixed up while you was off at the county seat."

Tim turned to face Polly. "House niggers, that's all right; but remember, I ain't goin' to invest good money in black field hands. You won't expect it?"

"Course not, though you might hire a couple of Pap's good hands till you git started. I've already asked him if you could have them on time! You've bit off so much, Tim. The niggers could come home to sleep at nights." She was talking fast.

"Just this spring," Tim said. What would he do about Zeb

Newby? The more work he gave Zeb the easier Zeb would find it to hold onto his place—or the other way round.

Polly opened the door into the front room, where little Arnett and Timmy were shrieking with laughter as they played with their Uncle Drew. Perry looked on with smooth contempt.

If he'd only stayed with Lovie, how simple and sweet life could have been. No children scared to death of you (at least not yet), no brothers (he didn't count Leon and Romie as half brothers), no slaves, no Zeb Newby with his itchin' elbows, no Harmony Blankinships. Just Lovie, and goin' off to live together on a piece of land where what you had depended on you and not on a prideful family.

Tim felt a warm hand in his, and smelled a faint odor of dried rose petals.

"I'm so glad you come home, Tim," Mima said, "things was gettin' so dull around here that it was just like one eternal Sunday. I think it was awful sweet of you to take Perry's part."

Tim didn't withdraw his hand until he caught Polly's eye on it, and then he did it slowly, so as not to hurt Mima's feelings.

And no little sister-in-law to think you was just about too proper to suit your wife. No sir!

Just then Timmy almost upset the table on which his grandpa's Bible lay:

"*And,*" Tim thought to himself, "no contract with the Almighty." Aloud he said, "Polly, I'm goin' to ride over to the place again. There's still an hour or so of daylight. I ain't really worked in so long I'll be like a horse off of grass if I don't plug in. See you all in a day or two."

PART IV

July 1852

PEOPLE IN THE NEIGHBORHOOD talked for years about the way Tim Larkin clove a farm out of that wilderness he'd bought, and with just the help of that lazy brother of his and a couple of Old Man Arnett's slaves. It seemed that one day they heard that Tim had come back from California with a belt full of gold, and the next time somebody got around with the news, it was that Tim and Polly and the young ones had moved into their cabin on the little knoll above the creek and that Tim had laid out to grow twenty acres of hemp in the bottomland and forty acres of corn on the prairie. But the thing that shocked them most was that Tim was aiming to fence off that highest view spot on his place for a church and burying ground. In the same round of gossip Harmony Blankinship had got a forty-dollar mortgage on her place to send the horse trader to California, and he'd gone off like a king of creation in a pair of silver spurs and a

Spanish saddle that would have done one of the older Arnett boys proud.

Tim knew well enough that Mortie had got the fifty-five dollars he paid for the plug Harmony was riding that day, and Tim never hitched the poor beast with Lonesome without getting so mad he was apt to beat Lonesome into a balking spell. But it didn't usually matter much, because Tim had so many digging, chopping, dragging jobs around the place that he could always vent his fury in a short time.

He was so proud of his crops that he made Polly and the boys walk out over the place every Sunday. They wouldn't dare use the mules to go visiting, because the poor things would be overworked.

"Tomorrow this piece of corn will be ready to plow over," he would say, "and if Perry comes back tonight he'll do good work tomorrow; if not, I'll plow it myself."

"I thought you was slim when you got back from Californy, but I didn't know slimness when I saw it," Polly told him. "Do you think Perry is worth his ten dollars a month?"

"No, but he's my brother, and about the only man alive that can follow me around and not be fired because he can't keep up."

One Monday when Perry didn't appear, Tim was almost as relieved as Polly, and yet he was worried. When Perry still hadn't come back by Tuesday, Tim thought he should put the two colored men to work and walk over to tell Drew. He could have sent the Negro, Polk, but he wanted to see his mother anyway. He ought to go see her oftener.

Tim crossed the field in which Drew was plowing, and the brothers stopped to talk.

"I'm mighty glad you're goin' over. Ma don't look good to me."

"Sick?"

"Not exactly; it's almost worse than her bein' sick of some

curable finickiness." Drew stroked his chin where he was letting his beard grow. "Maybe she's just lonesome with you and Perry both out of the house."

Tim stood in the middle of the corn row and measured the height of the corn against his thigh. "Mine's maybe a couple or three inches behind yours," Tim said. "But speak out about Ma."

Drew took a coil of tobacco from his pocket and bit off a piece, "Did you ever know Ma not to comb and brush her hair ever' night?"

"No!" Tim was shocked. He wondered if some way he could have told something that let her guess about old Lark.

"She don't jump and look expectant and happy when she hears a stranger comin'."

"Does Perry notice it when he comes home to stay over Sunday?"

"Stay over Sunday! That boy ha'n't been home except for two meals since he started workin' at your place."

"You don't say!" Tim suddenly felt guilty. "You don't suppose Ma's pinin' over Perry, do you?"

"Thinkin' maybe we uns was too hard on him?" Drew asked.

"Could be. She's allus been partial to Perry. You know when he was young he was delicate, that allus makes a mother more tender and concerned."

Yes, Tim knew. Polly petted Arnie shamefully.

"Drew, did you ever hear of people that got ideas out of other people's heads?" Tim asked it solemnly; he almost felt goosebumps on his own back.

Drew twisted his neck to look quick into Tim's eyes. "You didn't find Pap?"

Tim nodded.

There was a moment before Drew could speak, "Dead?"

"No." And then suddenly Tim remembered that time when Drew was drunk and told that he loved Polly, and he wished he hadn't said a word. "Don't ask any more, Drew. But if Ma

ain't sick, I guess she's got the idea somewheres that Pa ain't ever comin' back. Damn it, Drew, these Scotch and Irish has eyes in their fingers, but if she knowed so much, why'd she just now find it out?"

"I thought it was that she just got to puttin' two and two together. You come back, clear from Californy, in a little over two year. Pa would have had eight times enough time to go clear back to Ohio and find out where we'd come, and he knowed it in the first place. She must know he just didn't fancy comin'."

Tim was glad he'd come back. Polly would have waited for him. Tim felt his throat thicken. "Polly is goin' to have another baby."

"They was a time, Tim, onct, when I almost wisht you'd never come back."

"I almost didn't." Tim knew he and Drew could not look at each other. "If it hadn't been for a little gambler that I'd might near killed and our pap, I'd not be here today."

Tim felt foolish and yet relieved that he'd got some of the weight off his conscience, and that minute he wasn't afraid that Drew would tell.

"I think Polly would have died of grief if Arnie had died and you hadn't come back. She and Ma is a lot alike in their hearts."

"What do you aim we should do about Ma?"

"Maybe if you'd go tell her about Polly it would perk her up."

"Then again maybe it's all over Perry."

"No, it can't be; it wasn't Perry she brushed her hair for all these years."

"Should I tell her Perry's off somewhere?"

"Course not, we'll find him. Did he go off in his good clothes?"

"I guess so; allus does of a Saturday night, ridin' his mare like he'd never done a lick of work in all his days."

"How much money did he have?"

"Ten or twenty dollars I reckon."

"You go on in and see Ma and tell her I've got to go to the county seat to look after some abstracts—they allus sound important to Ma."

Drew was right; Ma didn't look like herself. She sat at the last row of her garden and didn't even flail at the blister bugs that flew over from her potatoes to her cucumbers.

"Hello, Timmy Lad," she said. "I was just settin' here thinkin' how foolish it was for me to save them cucumbers. I allus give enough away to feed a army."

She did look different, Tim thought, and imagine her sitting here lettin' even so much as a cucumber go to waste.

"Maybe you'd better save some," Tim said. "Polly hasn't had a cucumber this year so far."

Tim pressed a couple of the bugs into the soft black earth with his boot.

"Perry used to do the buggin' for me when he was a little feller; you and Drew would be out in the field."

Now it was coming; he'd hear why she was so low in her mind.

"Perry's got to be a right good hand," Tim lied.

"But, Timmy, son, don't you think six days a week is enough to work?" She said it apologetically. Not at all like her righteous indignation coming up.

Tim thought fast. "Well, I kind of 'lowed this year the Lord might excuse a little overwork, seein' I was gettin' a late start and all."

He'd like to take a strap to that Perry's back. Where had he been taking himself on Sundays?

"Perry ain't too stout. Not half as stout as you and Drew. I don't aim to criticize you, Tim, for I know you took Perry on when you thought he wouldn't stay here and work with Drew, bein' so mad about the widder."

So Perry had told her. He'd like to know just what kind of a story Perry fed out to his ma.

"It ain't no sin to marry up with a woman that's lost her husband. I kind of feel Perry might be more steady if he was settled down in a home." Ma wasn't looking at him; she seemed too tired to exert herself to keep her eyes alert to talk to Tim. "And as for them young brothers of hern that she was responsible for, I think she was a mighty brave woman to hold the family together."

Tim was boiling. He'd like to tell his ma the whole truth—but you couldn't hit a feller when he was down, and you sure couldn't pass off one more word of heaviness to your ma.

"How fer was it to Californy?" Ma looked up at Tim, a puzzled frown between her smooth brown brows.

"I don't know exactly, but it took us six months by ox and wagon teams to get there."

"How long did it take you to git home?"

"Around two and a half months. From the time I got on the boat headed for Nicaragua till I hit N'Orleans was thirty-one days, and I had to make a stop over there waitin' for a steamboat, and then I bought that mule, and——"

"But how long would it have been if you'd had to walk?"

Drew had been right; she had been figuring to herself. "Oh," Tim said, "no tellin' how long it would have been if I'd had to walk. Weeks—maybe months or years longer. It's a powerful distance, Ma."

At the sight of Minerva's drooping face Tim told a whopper. "All the way along I'd heard traces of a man answer'n' to Pap's description, who was huntin' his wife and boys. That was a long time ago, though," he added when his mother's face brightened too suddenly. "I just about forgot to tell you that Drew has to go to the county seat about some abstracts——" They'd get this Perry home if they had to break every bone in his body to do it.

"I got to be gittin' on, Ma."

"Might stay and eat dinner with me. I got the first mess o' green beans cookin' and without Drew, they's a lot goin' to waste."

"Oh, he'll be back in time for supper. Keep plenty of 'em hot on the hearth."

But Drew wasn't back for supper. He sent word to Tim by one of the Arnett niggers that he'd heard from some place that Perry had gone to Liberty.

Tim made Polly and the boys pack up to go over to spend a couple of days with his ma. With two young ones hollering through the house she couldn't be so mortal thoughtful.

On the way Polly told Tim she couldn't be entirely sorry to have Perry gone, because Mima had just about convinced her ma that Polly needed her for company and was planning to come stay a week.

"I'd sooner have Perry out of the house with Mima down there. Mima's a pretty girl and—shapely too."

Tim cleared his throat. The last time Mima had swung on his neck to kiss him, he'd wished he could tell her not to do it any more. She'd squeezed herself up to him in a way that wasn't just babyish.

"I ain't worried about Perry and Mima," Tim said. "They're too close of an age. Perry wants an older woman; he feels he's too confounded uppercrust for Mima."

"You don't just suppose Perry's over at Pa's, do you?" Polly said, still persisting on the idea of Mima and Perry.

"No, I don't," but Tim had a worse idea: what if Mima came over to see Polly while Polly was away from home?

"You'd better just take us to Mother Larkin's and get on home to tell Mima what's happened. I don't know why I didn't give Bulah a message for her."

Tim gave Lonesome his head on the way home. It was around four o'clock, and still time to finish off that little patch of corn along the south prairie. There'd been just enough rain this year so far. The crop ought to pay for the span of good mules Tim had bought "on time."

Tim was so concerned with his thought that he'd completely forgotten about Mima when she hailed him from the barn.

"Tim, I've been shoutin' myself hoarse around here. Where's Polly?"

Tim got off his mule and walked toward her.

"Here I come over to stay a week with you all and nobody's home, not even Bulah."

She had taken off her hat, her dark brown curls glistened in the June sunshine as if they'd been varnished.

"I'm awful sorry," Tim said as he tied Lonesome to a wild cherry tree, "but Polly's gone over to Ma's for a day or two."

"Nice cordial sister!" Mima's chin went up.

She had one of the smoothest round chins Tim had ever seen. He could remember when he had first married Polly that he always cupped her chin in his hand when he kissed her.

"You'd think she could of left Bulah or Polk to keep the house open till I got here. Tim, you're goin' to let Polly get as independent of manners as your ma if you don't watch out."

Tim didn't like the insinuation in Mima's voice. He knew she'd picked it up from her mother. "Oh, I guess Polly can look out for her own manners."

Mima came up and took Tim's arm. She was wearing a bought cotton blouse under a jumper that matched the orangish brown of her riding skirt. "Besides, I've got somethin' to tell Polly special."

Tim turned to walk beside Mima. She was taller than Polly, and though she had no better walk and pride of holding her head, her difference in age made her more eye-holding. Yes, Tim had to admit, more pulse-stirring too. She had a way of catching her breath that made you conscious of her throat and breast, and a way of putting her heart in her eyes when she talked to you—almost as if you were the only man in the world. Tim felt disgust with himself that he would be moved by this little kid he'd carried on his shoulder when she was five.

"How old are you, Mima?" Tim did not let himself look at

her, though he could not stop his ears against her sudden intake of breath.

"Sixteen, goin' on seventeen. That's why I decided to tell Polly first."

Lovie was probably just a few months older than Mima, and Lovie didn't have to throw herself at a man for him to know he wanted her—Lovie had no tricks—she just was.

"Tell Polly what?" Tim asked.

"Where's Perry?"

"We don't know."

"Don't know! Ain't he out plowin' or choppin' or hoein' or somethin'?"

"No."

Mima's sudden breath made Tim look at her. She'd grown pale.

"When did he leave?" Her lips were so stiff she had to keep wetting them with her tongue.

"Saturday night."

"He—he told me he had to work all day Sunday and I mustn't meet him."

Mima was clutching Tim's arm now with both her hands, and Tim could feel that she was trembling. They had walked from the barn, until now they were standing under the horse-chestnut tree beside the yard path, the shade was cool, but not that cool.

"So help me God, Tim Larkin, if I have a baby I'm goin' to swear it's yours unless you help me."

Tim felt as if somebody had kicked him in the back of his knees. He caught Mima's arms and shook her. "What are you sayin' Jemima Arnett?"

"P-Polly would have to admit she was away and that you had come home alone. She'd have no proof that Bulah and Polk was here, so how could you deny it?"

Tim felt worse than when he knew the little runt was ahead of him in a bush aiming at his heart with his gun. He had to catch his nerve back. Was he going to stand here and let this

little minnow run away with his hook? Not so's he could tell it! He'd set out to catch big fish, and he'd just one hook to his line, this place, and if Mima let out such a scandal as this he'd find himself run clean out of the country—maybe on a rail, and what about Polly and the boys, and Ma and Drew? He said aloud:

"Jemima Arnett, you're goin' to do nothin' of the kind," but he was scared. "Polly's your sister. You couldn't do that to Polly."

"Oh I couldn't? You just see. I've never been first with anybody in our family. She's Pap's favorite, all the boys think she's just perfect, and Ma thinks the sun, moon, and stars was made special to shine on her. Oh, couldn't I? I thought when she married and left home I'd be *it*, the only girl and everything—and you go away so's she has to come back and *not* alone but with one young un in her lap and one in her belly!"

"Mima! stop talkin' like that. Stop!"

But Mima went right on:

"Anybody'd know it wasn't Drew's, and I won't have it known that I was jilted by any Perry Larkin." Mima's teeth were chattering.

Tim led her up to the house to sit down on the doorstep as much for the sake of his own knees as hers. "Mima, you've got to talk sense. What makes you think you're goin' to have a baby?"

"There's one sure way of gettin' one. You'd ought to know." Mima looked hard now. She was talking with her teeth clamped together to keep them from chattering. "I told Perry Saturday that we was goin' to have to get married."

All at once Tim had a sinking feeling in his chest. What if Drew didn't find Perry? And in that instant he knew he wouldn't.

"You haven't told anybody else about this?"

"No."

"Can you keep your mouth shut and not let anybody know

if you git so sick at your stomach you've got to run for a bucket?"

"I don't know, I'm not sick yet."

"Maybe you ain't caught," Tim grasped at this frail hope.

"Yes I am. And the worst of it is," tears sprang to Mima's eyes, "it wasn't Perry I was wantin' but you all the time. I'd shut my eyes and say 'Tim' to myself."

Tim tried to think of something to say. It was all like some crazy kid.

"And that's what's made me so mad! You comin' back after goin' away for two years, probably havin' a different woman at ever' stop—and here me and Polly both is pantin' for you like a pair of little——"

"Mima!" Tim wouldn't let her be so coarse. He wondered how Polly kept her talk from getting foul, when she lived around Mrs. Arnett and Mima.

"You git on your horse and take out for home and keep your mouth shut in more than one way. We'll find Perry for you if it's at all reasonable. I'd near about as soon see you face the disgrace than to have you married to Perry."

"Oh, Tim, you *do* love me then?" Mima flung herself at him. "You *would* run away with me; I've knowed it all the time."

Tim caught Mima's wrists and held her at arm's length, "You little fool! I wouldn't be half a man if I didn't find a piece of flesh like you excitin', but you forget I got a wife—and she ain't exactly repulsive. And besides, I've got a stake in a lot of land, and what kind of a future do you think I'd have if I loped off with you?"

Mima was trying to bite his hands and kick his shins so he would let her loose.

Tim wanted to tell her that in New Orleans he'd had experience in turning down women because he was afraid they'd get his gold. Down there they called them by their right name.

All at once Tim knew that he might have got too friendly with Mima if he hadn't been on his guard. God! Men were

such fools where pretty women were concerned. If it hadn't been for Perry falling first, he wasn't positive he wouldn't have landed in her web. Maybe he already was in it without any of the sinful pleasure.

"I hate you! Hate you!" Mima screamed. "And if you think you're the only——"

Just then Tim thought how it would look if Bulah or Polk should come in the yard and see him fighting here with his wife's sister. He dropped her wrists so quickly that she sat back on the ground with a thump.

"Damn your leather-necked-black-bearded——" she paused to think, "guts. I've got another string to my kite!"

Tim reached down to help her up. She slapped at his hand and swung to her feet.

"Thanks for throwin' me down so I thought of Percy Downing. His folks has got more niggers and land down in Cass County than you'll ever have if you'd live to be a thousand! And he's back here in Clay County, huntin' fillies!"

And it was mighty lucky for Tim that Percy Downing was still crazy for Mima, because Drew and Tim couldn't find Perry. It seemed he'd sold his horse at Westport Landing and had gone south on one of the steamboats.

It turned out to be one of these hurried weddings; the kind that would leave a girl's mother in a fluster even though she wasn't already afraid someone would fail to live up to the proprieties.

As Tim stood behind Polly and watched Mima married to Percy Downing he couldn't help feeling sorry for the boy. He knew from Percy's guilty look that Mima had managed to get him into some kind of a bush courtship so that he'd feel himself a devil of a sinner. Heaven hope he didn't ever grow wise to Mima's ways.

Tim was going to be grateful enough at getting Mima out of the country that he was willing for Polly to give Mima her

best handwoven coverlid. Old Man Arnett gave Mima two slaves the same as he had given Polly, with a lifetime ownership.

"What we're goin' to do with any more slaves is more than I can see," Percy said to Tim as they were counting over the things to pack in the back of the spring wagon Percy had bought to hitch to his fine span of matched bays. "My father is one of those men who can't bring himself to do real slavin', and yet his slaves multiply like bird dogs."

Percy's florid skin became redder.

Tim suddenly thought he was going to like Percy. "You come up here buyin' saddle mares for your pap's stables and go home with a likely filly all right!"

Percy hurried to add that it would be all right with his father. "Our house has been mighty lonesome since my mother died and my sister married. A place couldn't be lonesome with Jemima around."

Percy once more blushed. He was a good-looking boy with almost red hair.

"I wish we wasn't goin' away so soon, so I could get a few pointers on managin' an Arnett woman from you."

"What I could tell you wouldn't apply," Tim said, "but you know horses." On second thought Tim hoped Percy's father didn't know horses too well.

By December 1855 Tim was farming three hundred acres of his land, he had built three more rooms onto his house, and he had managed to get possession of the two little bites out of his section. He couldn't help feeling a little guilty when he thought of Zeb Newby, because Zeb had lost his land because he just couldn't seem to learn how to manage. He had worked some for Tim, but not enough to keep his interest paid. Tim just couldn't endure to see that nice piece of land go to wrack and ruin, so he hadn't been too generous in hiring Newby. The other little house on the twenty-five acres Tim had bought for

cash, and cheap because the owner wanted to go out to Kansas to settle himself a piece of new land.

As Tim went about his snug barn, finishing his chores by the light of a lantern, he felt himself mighty content. He was hurrying to put down feed for his mules so that he could get to the house before the baby went to sleep or little Honey Love got too tired waiting at the window.

Polly's third child had been a girl, and Tim felt sure it was somehow a special gift from the Lord for the beautiful fence he'd put around the burying ground, or maybe a reward for not getting tangled up with Harmony Blankinship. He never went to Harmony's house without one or both of the boys. He kept them beside him while he talked about her crops; or the fat shoats she wanted to sell; or the mortgage on her place that he paid off once for her so she wouldn't have to hunt another place when she was about to have another baby by land-knows-who.

He hadn't heard a word out of Harmony for three or four months. Drew said the last time he saw her she was riding with the cabinetmaker who was going through the country putting fancy cupboards in all the houses.

Tim was whistling through his teeth, dumping corn in the horse troughs and hay in the mangers. That was probably why Timmy had to shout a second time.

"Pappy, can't you hear?"

"Timmy, that you? What you want? Mighty good job of cleaning out these stalls you and Arnett done. I'll see if I can't find somethin' in my pocket for you when I come in." Tim's voice was proud.

"There's a man at the house come to see you."

"What's his name?"

"He didn't say."

Suddenly Tim knew there was something wrong here. Why wouldn't a stranger tell his name? Tim made himself ask in a steady voice, "What does he want?"

"He won't say. Just says he's got business with you."

Blankinship! Come after all these years for an accountin'! Just about time for him to have failed to strike it rich in Australia and be back here. Blackmail for the rest of his life—a regular gold mine now at last. Three hundred acres of land—producing corn and hemp and cattle so fat they brought the top price at the market!

"What did he look like?" Tim had to clear his throat to get out the last word.

"Just an old man with a beard and a gold tooth in front."

That would be Blank all right; any man with a beard looked old to Timmy.

"Do you think it's goin' to snow in time for Christmas?"

"Might."

"How little snow do you think it would take to be sure Santy Claus could make it?"

"Enough to cover the ground, and the roofs I reckon."

Old Blank had come back at last, and just when Tim had bought those two pieces of land and didn't have enough cash on hand to buy him off once and for all. And when Old Man Arnett had been having trouble with three of his slaves running off into Kansas, so that he'd feel he couldn't loan any big amount right now.

"Mother said to hurry anyway. Bulah is makin' fried cakes. The stranger's goin' to stay for supper."

Polly and Tim had decided they weren't going to have Polly called "Ma." That was too old-fashioned. It had been hard to break Timmy and Arnett, but little Honey Love took it up from the first, the way she said Mother would soften a heart of grindstone.

"I just remembered I hadn't watered Lonesome," Tim said.

"You'd better come back after supper to do it."

"No, now. Run tell Mother I'll be there as soon as I can, and give this to Honey Love to keep awake until I come."

Timmy took his father's big silver watch on the handmade

leather chain that Grandpa Arnett had made. "Some day will I have a big watch like this?"

"You sure will; I'll see to that." Tim put his hand on his son's shoulder and held on an instant, as if he couldn't endure to let the child go from him. Then he gave him a little push and word to hurry.

Tim didn't know why he called that to the boy, hurry, when every minute was taking them closer to their loss. Even little Honey Love would sense some of the shame of her father. Why had he kept that two hundred dollars in the first place? Almost four years ago that money had seemed too important to give to Harmony and the horse trader. In fact, Tim remembered that he had thought up a good reason for keeping it. Yes, a good reason!

Now he had no time to recall anything about that money. Even with the churchyard and a good fence around it—a place where already there were eleven graves—couldn't make up for this money.

He couldn't stay here in the barn forever. He came out into the starlit winter night, the air so cold, frost particles already glistened on the sheds and fences. Tim laid a hand on his stake and rider rails. "Lord," he said aloud, "I didn't aim it should turn out so disgraceful; I guess I was hopin' and dependin' on you to see to that."

He looked up at the house, and blew out his lantern, ready to hang on the outside peg. Even the logs of the house were dear to him tonight. He was too concerned to figure that he could get around this somehow; even at compound interest that two hundred dollars would not be the worth of this place. The place alone wasn't what Tim prided most. There was his rank in the community, before his children, and most of all with Polly.

As he opened the door, little Honey Love ran into his arms, a flash of blue and gold. Her hair was that golden yellow that only children's hair could be, and so soft it seemed to spin itself

about his fingers. Her eyes were wide apart and blue like the Larkins'.

"Pappy, Pappy!" she squeezed his neck and made him listen to the ticking of his big silver watch that she had about her neck, the handmade leather strap just right to let it hang close enough for safety, and yet low enough that she could see it or hold it against her ear.

Honey Love laid her head on his shoulder and told him she wanted "bye-to-bed."

"But you ain't had yo' suppah," Bulah came from the fireplace, "and Mistah Timothy, I'm plumb afraid this food won't be fit to eat."

Tim gave her a tired smile, "It will probably be like a queen's fare to this traveler."

The two boys must be in the other room with their mother and the stranger. (Two fires were kept going even in hard winter, just like those at the Arnetts'.)

"We'll be right out to eat." Tim promised, and held tight to little Honey Love as he opened the door.

The stranger was showing something to the boys, and his head was bent over his hands. Tim felt choked at sight of the two boys. Arnett had almost caught up with his age now, being sturdy and quick.

"Evenin', Polly." It all sounded so natural—the baby lay sleeping in his cradle behind Polly's chair, so there'd be no danger from flying sparks.

The stranger jumped to his feet with embarrassment and turned to face Tim.

"You're Mr. Larkin, I believe?"

"Yes," Tim stuck out his hand to a man that he had never clapped eyes on before, and Polly and the boys stood back with awe before his cordiality. "Supper's waitin' won't you come out to eat?"

Tim had no idea what this stranger wanted, but he knew if

the man had been a desperado or slobbering with hydrophobia he'd still have been asked to eat.

After Tim had signed up to buy the hemp hackler for more money than he could afford, he sat before the fire and watched Polly put the boys to bed. The stranger had gone up to the loft to sleep in Perry's room.

Tim could tell from the way Polly worked that she hadn't liked the idea of the hemp hackler. She pulled the covers too hard and pushed the trundle bed too fast, and her mouth looked tight. He couldn't tell her that he'd have bought a circus tent from this stranger if that had been what he was selling.

Finally, when she came to sit beside the fire and braid her hair, he caught her hand and stopped her beside his chair.

"Don't be cross with me, Mother."

Polly bit her lip. "Why did you have to buy that costly old hemp hackler; you know there's nothin' like a good strong black man for hacklin' hemp."

"I know," Tim felt too tired to argue when he couldn't tell her the truth.

"You just let that man flatter you into buyin'. You'd think you was the blackest abolitionist to hear him talk, and yet you eat the victuals ever' day prepared and set up by a slave."

Polly's eyes looked black and too large in her fine-featured face.

"That don't mean that I think slave labor is good business. If Bulah wasn't past the bearin' age I'd never of let you take her from your pa. I don't like the idea of sellin' black people any more than he does, but I shore don't think it pays to have a passel of pickaninnies to feed and keep. Your pa's got more slaves than he knows what to do with, and he's settin' over there right now worryin' what will become of all of them if he'd die. And it's like losin' one of the family when he does sell one or two because they ain't behavin'! He can't endure the pain of seein' families separated."

"What would *you* do?"

Tim pulled Polly gently down on his lap and pressed her head over on his shoulder. "Don't make me have to defend the fact that I don't want to git mixed up in slavery, Mother, I'm too tired."

"Poor Timmy." Polly ran her fingers over his heavy brows and closed his eyelids. Tim had seen her go suddenly tender with the children when she thought they might have had too much. "Do you know when you first came back," Polly said, "I thought I'd never git used to you wearin' a beard, and now I'd not know you if you shaved it off."

Tim turned his head so he could rub his cheek against her white, cool forehead. "You're mighty to my taste, Mother."

"And I guess a body'd have to be a stone image not to love you too, Timmy."

She sat up straight on his lap and her mouth curved. "But I do wish sometimes you wasn't such a muddleheaded softheart though."

Tim grinned lazily.

"But there's somethin' I been worryin' about all day! You're sure you didn't foreclose on that forty acres, Tim, sooner than you needed to?" Her mouth could straighten into firmness mighty quick. "Zeb Newby's; they've allus been kind of pitiful to me."

Tim laughed aloud. "Like a woman, praise you one minute, blame you the next! Well sir, I'm keepin' Newby on to live in his house and work as a hand for me. He's a plumb good worker, Polly, but no management. Course he allus talks too much, especially about slavery. But I can put up with that."

Now Polly laughed. "You act like you thought you was God."

"And that reminds me." Tim was glad Polly had brought up the subject. All through supper, when he'd talked to amuse the boys and the stranger, he'd been thinking that he owed something special to the Lord for not sending Blankinship home to plague him. "Ain't these boys of ourn gettin' big enough to go

to church? I've half a mind to start breakin' ground up there on the hill when the frost goes."

Polly's eyes glistened, "I think it would be fine."

Right then Tim would have given two hundred dollars cash if he'd had the spine to tell her the whole story about Harmony Blankinship, but he lay his head back against the big chair and almost went to sleep where he sat.

The next night Polly wouldn't think he was such a "muddle-headed softheart." In fact, she accused Drew and Tim of being completely heartless.

The three were talking in the kitchen so they wouldn't waken the children. Drew had come thundering up on his horse just as Tim and Polly were getting ready for bed.

"How he can think we owe him anythin' after all this time," Drew said.

"He's still your brother and dear to your ma's heart," Polly persisted.

"Oh, Polly, don't be a fool! If one of your own brothers run away and near broke your ma's heart would you run to buy him out of jail so's he could come back and do it all over again?" Tim was striding about the kitchen, picking up things that should have been left alone. Now he was holding the gourd dipper and sloshing water all over Bulah's freshly sanded floor without once taking a drink.

"To my mind," Drew argued (he was stone sober), "I think it 'ud do him good to have to cool his tail in some stone jail! Five hundred dollars! You'd think somebody would of got suspicious before they cashed that much out."

"Probably did, or the amount would of been a thousand!" Tim's blue eyes were furious. He reached out with the hand that wasn't holding the dipper and tried to snuff the candle. "Damn candles. Who makes them with carpet warp, or bailin' rope for wicks!" He sucked his burned fingers.

Today had been a miserable day. It began with Harmony

Blankinship hailing him in the middle of the road to tell him she had to move off her place at once. This time money wouldn't help, for the man from whom she'd borrowed wanted her land. The cabinetmaker would help her move any place she could find, and he'd buy the extra victuals for the family if Harmony would manage to find a house and a cow somewhere.

Tim hadn't yet told Polly that he'd let Harmony move her pack of kids to the little house on the twenty-five acres, and that he'd promised to loan her a cow for the winter.

"It looks to me like you two boys is goin' to have to dig down in your jeans and put Perry back in the class of honest brothers!" Polly said firmly.

She could be the stubbornest *little* woman Tim had ever seen.

"I can't see that we owe Perry Larkin so much as a dip of snuff!" Tim said. He went over and put the dipper back in the water bucket.

"I suppose you'd both druther your ma would find out that Perry's down at Jefferson City in a jailhouse would you? Nice and pleasant contemplatin' that!"

"But, Polly," Drew was always patient with her, "you act like Tim and me ain't spent the most of our lives chasin' after him. And nothin' he can do can hurt Ma as much as him runnin' off in '52. Never even send word he's alive till we git these overdrafts at the bank!"

"And you act like five hundred dollars ain't nothin'. Why that's half what I brought back with me from Californy."

"I know!" Polly brightened. "Move him and this woman he's married down here on your new twenty-five acres and make him *work* out the money. That would beat layin' over in a jailhouse and would save all kind of a stink in the neighborhood."

Tim didn't dare look at Drew. He had a feeling Drew had heard in town that Harmony was already moving into the cabin.

"I don't think that would be such a good idy," Drew said thoughtfully. "After all, you could hire one of Old Man Arnett's

slaves for one hundred and ten dollars a year and you'd git your money's worth."

Polly looked quickly from Drew to Tim. "I smell a rat," she said standing up like she'd been touched with a briar. "You two boys is tryin' to keep somethin' from me."

Tim went back to the waterbucket and started clattering the gourd dipper in the wooden bucket.

"And I bet I wouldn't take three guesses to name what's raisin' the smell around here. Tim Larkin, where did you have Polk take that red cow this evenin'?"

"Now, Polly, that's got nothin' to do with Perry."

"Course it hasn't. Another thing—what would it have to do with that vacant house on the twenty-five acres?"

"That house ain't vacant," Tim's voice was up now. He felt Polly had gone beyond her rights. "I rented that house to the cabinetmaker."

"Not by himself?"

"No."

"Tim Larkin, I won't live on this place with Harmony Blankinship."

"Only one way fer you to git out of it. Make me deed over that twenty-five acres to the cabinetmaker."

Drew looked like he wanted to crawl out through a crack. He scooted his chair back from the fireplace with a rasping screech that made cold chills run up all three spines.

"Or to me," Polly said. "You could deed it to me."

"What if I did?"

Polly looked down at her hands clenched before her, "I could at least explain it to Ma and my sister-in-laws, as if I'd really rented it!"

For a minute Tim wanted to take Polly in his arms and tell her that Harmony Blankinship was nothing but a weight on his conscience, but he was too tarnationally mad.

"I'll do it tomorrow." His voice was full of hate, because he

wouldn't have it break here before Drew. "But you dasn't move her out and break my word to the carpenter."

"I haven't any notion of doin' that." Polly was lofty again. "But I ain't above goin' over to your ma's and tellin' her the whole story as it stands, includin' Perry bein' in jail."

Polly didn't have that high forehead for nothing, Tim thought. She had both of them—big black-bearded men cut down to boy size before her.

Drew spoke first. "I've got three colts that I been aimin' to raise and train for tandem drivin'. They'd bring three hundred at Liberty or Lexington."

"Don't do it, Drew. I can git 'time' on payin' for this hemp hackler, and I've got forty hogs I was aimin' to hold till after Christmas."

"No, I'll sell one of my colts and make my half up some way, Tim," Drew said. "You got Polly and the young uns to look out for, and besides I heard in town that you was aimin' to break ground for that church house, come good weather."

Polly looked quickly at Tim, her face overspread with suspicion, but Tim turned his back to snuff the candle, and he was glad that giving a church house didn't bind him eternally to pious talk.

PART V

June 1861

TIMOTHY LARKIN in his Sunday clothes walked toward his orchard. Polly would send one of the children for him when she was ready, and would have another one bring a rag to dust off his boots. Polly was a good, careful wife without being fussy like her mother.

If anything could make Tim forget the condition of the country, this warm, bright air, fragrant of the orchard and atwitter with birds, could do it. It did seem strange not to go to church up on the hill, but the deacons had decided it was wiser to postpone services until the political affairs of the state were a little more settled.

"No use havin' a scrap in the church," one of them had said. "All of us know each other and have worked together too long to risk an open break. Anyway, I've a feelin' this preacher that's comin' on trial leans a little bit too much to the Blair side for us to risk him."

Tim almost felt Blair was right, but being married to Polly,

he couldn't come out and say in the open that he felt Governor Claiborne Jackson was exceeding his power in calling for 50,000 men to defend the state from Federal troops when the Assembly wouldn't vote for the state to go with the South. Jackson had told the President he wouldn't send men to fight against Missouri's sister states. In fact, he felt Lincoln's request was illegal and unconstitutional. "Not one man will the state of Missouri furnish to carry on such an unholy war." And yet he was calling for men to keep the Federal government from taking their own arsenals.

Let them have their arms and ammunition. Tim felt he had no stake in this whole business. No slaves, thank goodness, and as long as the States Rights people left him alone—well, he was going to stay out of it.

Tim stopped by the early June apple tree, already beginning to drop. He bent down and picked up one that had fallen, to turn it in his hand. Red and sun-warm, with a damp place on its cheek where it had lain on the dew-wet ground. There was no worm in this apple to make it fall. Those boys had been down here again shaking the trees and not picking up all they shook off. He sank his teeth into the apple, juicy and tart, his favorite. Some folks liked early harvest, and others July sweets, but give him early June's any day.

A bee swung around his head as if to light on the very apple he was eating. It might be a mistake to have those bees down there at the edge of the orchard with the children coming here to play, but they liked the honey.

When he was a child he'd helped cut bee trees. Now the county was filling up so that you'd be trespassing if you cut many down. Some boys had cut one of his good elms by mistake. Left it lay, branches not trimmed, to die before its time. Why couldn't you teach boys to use a little judgment? They were probably now joining up with one or another of the brigades and would be cutting one another down next.

He looked along the rows of trees in neat formation; apples,

pears, cherries, plums, and peaches, like soldiers on parade or tents in camp. He checked his thoughts; he'd come out here to think about growing things, not blights.

He ambled the length of the orchard to the rows of grapes along the edge, down to the southwest corner, past the winter apple trees to see if they were setting on.

He heard Honey Love running through the grass, calling his name in a high singsong.

"Ready to go is she?" Tim asked her.

She was seven now, with fat golden-yellow curls and slim legs under her long dress made of store-bought muslin trimmed in blue ribbons.

"Umhum." Honey Love did not look up at him but kept her eyes busy with finding a ripe apple.

She was still the prettiest thing Tim had ever seen, in spite of the gap in her teeth right now.

"Can't you find one that suits, Honey Love?"

"No."

"Here's one." Tim picked one off the tree above his head.

"Pap."

"Yes."

"Will you do somethin' for me?" She took the apple he handed her without looking up at him. (Her lashes were darker than her hair.)

"Just name it," Tim's voice would have made any child feel flattered by his complete attention.

"I'm too big to be called Honey Love."

"Oh." Tim didn't laugh, though he couldn't help wanting to. She was such a dainty piece with her quick ways and soft voice! "You want I should call you 'Minerva'?"

"No, because that sounds too much like Grandma Larkin, and when we go to church we'd never know which one a body was amind to have come."

Tim did laugh this time. "That's sure right."

"So, I thought if you started callin' me by my middle name—

you know today I'm meetin' my cousins Marybell and Hattie from Cass County for the first time, and I don't want them to think I don't have a name."

For the life of him, Tim couldn't remember what that middle name was—Minerva, Minerva—she'd been Honey Love to him from the minute he saw her wrapped in the little white shawl that had swaddled all of his children. But she was special, a little girl, and he'd never wanted anything more than this little girl; he knew that when he held her in his arms.

"Let's hear you say it." Honey Love had taken his hand and was leading him back to the house. "I want to be sure you'll remember."

"You say it first," Tim side-stepped.

"Anne."

"Anne," Tim said.

Honey Love smiled up at him, his big hand in both her small ones. "I'll call you 'Father' if you want me to. It sounds more fancified."

"What if I'd not reco'nize myself?"

"I'd call you twice. We say 'Mother.' Pappy don't go with Mother."

"Maybe you're right."

"Arnett says you think I'm allus right." She was trying now to match her steps to his. "He says he bets if Mother'd spank me you'd spank her."

"You just try doin' somethin' mean enough fer her to spank you if you want to find out." He bent down and gave her a couple of playful spats.

But he'd have to watch himself. He must not let the boys feel he was partial. And here he'd already had Old Man Arnett start making a little saddle for Honey Love to fit a pony he'd seen for sale in Hainsville. The boys had a horse together, but this year Honey Love would start to school, and she'd have to get there some way. Maybe he'd better buy that colt Newby wanted to sell. Timmy could have it—he was big for thirteen,

and not afraid of anything on four legs. Then Arnett could have the horse the boys had been riding to school. Arnett could never manage the colt, and besides one horse was the same to him as another. He liked books better.

Polly was sitting on the front porch holding the baby, who had been named for his father's favorite candidate, Stephen A. Douglas. Since the great man's death, only a few days before, the family had started calling the baby Stevie instead of Stephen A.

"Ain't it funny," Honey Love said, "I got two brothers older and two younger, I'll bet my little cousin from Cass County won't have that."

"Probably not; in fact, I know she's got one sister and one brother."

"I'll probably like the brother the best."

Tim looked at her sharply. He knew all right what she meant, but he didn't like the sound of it.

"Hurry, Timothy," Polly said calmly. "If Mima is as fretted to see me and my family as I am to see hers, she's thinkin' we're never comin'."

"Be right there, Mother. I brought you a good apple to eat on the way."

"Thanks. I bet it's an early June."

Tim was as anxious to see Mima's family as Polly was. This was the first time she had been home since she rode away the day of her wedding behind the handsome team in the neat little buggy with Percy Downing. Cass County wasn't so far away, but Mima had been busy with her family, though she'd managed to have her three the first four years and hadn't had another one.

It would be a real pleasure to go to the Arnetts' for a Sunday dinner and to see all the children, if it weren't for the hovering subject that all of them must manage to talk around and over without ever stubbing into.

"I'd like to take Bulah and Polk if there was room for them; they thought so much of sister Mima," Polly said as she got in the spring wagon and tucked a summer robe around her best dove-gray dress. Tim knew how happy she was to be able to wear it again.

Tim climbed out of the wagon, "Why didn't you say so? Timmy, you and Arnett, wouldn't you just as soon ride your horse over to your grandpap's?"

"Oh, Pap, he ain't even up, we'd have to chase him all over the woods pasture," Arnett said. "We'd be so dirty, Grandma wouldn't like it."

Tim felt his old momentary irritation with Arnett. It was true, but why did that child always have to be first with an answer and a reason for everything?

"Never mind," Polly said. "Mima sure must plan to come over here sometime before she leaves. Do whip up the team, Tim, it's after nine o'clock, and Mima will think we're puttin' on airs because she's back."

Mima stood in the Arnetts' big front hall and held Polly at arm's length. Mima was plump as a quail when the wheat is ripe, and her hair was as glossy as ever and matched the brown braid trimming on her green cashmere skirt.

"Polly Larkin, you look thirty-five years old if you look a day," Mima said. "Don't Tim give you enough to eat? Or is it this nice baby that keeps you thin as a whip? Or is it that fine snug dress? Polly Arnett, I'll bet you starved yourself to be able to wear it again! But you mustn't do it. Too slim a body's age shows in her face."

"And Tim!" Mima ran to him and kissed him, just as she had done when she was a girl at home. "I'll bet you haven't gained or lost a pound or a hair since I seen you back in '52. Poor Percy ain't so lucky. I'm powerful afraid for his head—comin' out at the top like Pap's did."

Her talk simply flowed over them. They didn't need to do

anything but listen and smile and nod. "And to think this great big boy is Timmy! My! bigger than your ma, and Arnie not far behind. Arnie, I remember when you was so puny-lookin' that we all felt Polly'd never raise you."

"Sometimes I can throw Timmy," Arnett said soberly.

But his Aunt Mima had turned to Honey Love. "And so this is your little girl! Oh, Honey, you look sweet enough to eat with a spoon."

She caught the child in her arms and kissed her hard on first one cheek and then the other. "Now *don't* tell me she's not mean and spiteful and hateful to everybody," Mima beamed. "All little girls as pretty as you are supposed to be nasty so people won't like them, otherwise it isn't fair to the plainer ones!"

Tim felt awkward, and little George, whose turn was next, relieved his father's mind by scuttling around behind his aunt and into the big room, so that Tim had an excuse to break up the family group.

"I'm so sorry you can't see my children now. They just got back from a ride, and all three of them had to go get cleaned up from the skin out."

Mima would probably spring these three beautiful and princely children on the family as a group, make a grand entrance. She wouldn't let Polly cut a better figure.

Polly had gone to kiss her father and leave little Stephen A. Douglas with him.

"You sure don't look defeated to me," Mr. Arnett said to the handsome fat baby. "Tim, I think it was kind of a mistake to name this boy for a candidate."

"Should I change it to Abe?"

"Ha'dly, in this house!" Mrs. Arnett came in from the kitchen, bringing a fragrance of delicious cooking with her. "And when you heah what Mima knows about the situation in Jeff'son City you'll be off with my fou' boys to join a brigade."

"I'm too old," Tim said.

"Old! Not yet thi'ty-five!" Mrs. Arnett scoffed, "You'll be young at fifty; just look at your ma."

"Besides, what would become of Polly and the children if I went prancin' off to join a brigade and follow Sterlin' Price?" Tim sat down beside his father-in-law and held out his hands to the baby.

"He's all right," Mr. Arnett said. "I'll hand him over when he gets too active."

"Polly puts him on a pallet on the floor sometimes; he's learnin' to crawl and wipes up the floors."

The baby, on seeing his father, set up a howl to be taken. Tim brought out his silver watch and held it to the baby's ear. The baby looked small trying to wangle the watch from his pap's big hand.

"Ma, just look," Mima had come into the front room. "Can you believe this big wild and handsome feller can take care of babies? Tim, don't hold that young un and spoil all my memory of you!"

Tim remembered a special scene with Mima, under a horse-chestnut tree. He suddenly realized he was anxious to see that first child of Mima's. He would be the one to see any resemblance to Perry. In all these years Perry had had no child by his wife. He'd finally married a widow in Jefferson City with three children.

Poor Perry was right down there in the thick of it. Nobody knew when the lid would blow off of the Missouri capital. Tim was glad to be up here in Clay County, where there wasn't anything left to take. Liberty had an arsenal, but it wasn't fought over, just a peaceful surrender, because when the two hundred men from Jackson and Clay slipped up on that night in April, the poor guards had nothing else to do. Tim's brothers-in-law were drilling with U.S. rifles to shoot U.S. troops!

Tim heard confusion on the stairs and looked up to see a slave in a neat black dress and white head cloth usher three

spindling children into the room. The oldest was probably the thinnest, with wide-apart eyes and a pointed chin like her mother's; her hair was so soft and fine that it hung limp about her face, not in fat, bobbing curls like Honey Love's. The other two were redheaded. They belonged to Percy all right, and they even had his thin skin that was too quick to show color.

"Oh, children!" Mima exclaimed, as if by talking gay and fast she could make up for their homeliness.

She introduced them around, and like little figures worked with a string they bowed and smirked. No genuine smiles here or open disgust that they were having to make such a show of themselves. It was as if she'd trained them so she could show up Polly's little country family.

Suddenly Tim felt sorry for Mima in her fine cashmere dress, with her gold watch and chain, and too many rings on her fingers. He remembered that she'd hated Polly because everyone in the family seemed to love her most, and here Polly's children cast shadows over Mima's.

Tim put out his hand to the little redheaded boy, who must be almost six years old. "Howdy, son. I got somethin' in my pocket for you."

Immediately the child's eyes brightened, "Not a ridin' whip or a pair of spurs?"

"Say, that would be somethin', but this is better because it won't take up space goin' home—it's fer right now."

Little George, who had been standing behind his grandfather's chair came around to see. "For me too, Pap?"

"Yes sir, both of you boys. Hold out your hands."

Tim took from his coat pocket two early June apples that had been polished in the ride from the orchard.

"Oh," George let a sigh of disappointment pass his lips, "We——"

But the little redheaded boy took his quickly and bit into it. His face brightened by a quick smile and close tears. "My pap grows apples too."

Tim was proud for Percy of this little redheaded boy. No matter if Mima did lead Percy around by the nose, as Tim suspected she would, Percy would get his money's worth in that one little boy's quick face.

"Uncle Tim is the one who went to Californy," Mima said.

"Was it fun?"

"Comin' home was."

"That's what my papa said when he left," the oldest child of Mima had come over to watch her brother. "He said he'd bring me a belt made of Frank Blair's hide."

"Sister, no! You mustn't talk that way!"

"He did. Blair is an abolitionist. He wants all the white people to give up their houses and live in slave shanties."

Tim looked quickly at Honey Love. Her face was so innocent and puzzled, he wished some way he could pick her up and take her home before these children who had heard too much about the war could fill her sweet little mind with its stench.

"If there was a few more men in this state with the courage of Claiborne Jackson, we'd not be up here and our papa off at war, would we, children?" Mima said.

Mr. Arnett's voice came in soothing and slow. "Blair was raised to slavery, just like you, Mima. I guess he must think he's right or he wouldn't be willin' to risk his life."

"Oh, Pap, I might-a knowed you'd see both sides!" Mima's voice was edgy. "And you with twenty-eight slaves, countin' young uns. And I can tell you right now that if you and the rest of the slave owners in this state don't stand up on your hind legs and drive this Blair outfit out of the state we're all goin' to be run down like a pack of thieves."

Mima's round cheeks had become flushed; her rings flashed as she flailed the air with her hands.

"Cass County happens to be too close to Kansas and Jim Lane for comfort right now, but I'll take my innocent children

back there for the duration of this skirmish if you all sit around here and talk and don't *do* a thing."

"You' fou' brothe's are trainin' in a brigade, Mima. Don't get so excited," Mrs. Arnett said. "They're missin' a mighty good Sunday dinnah to ma'ch in the hot sun."

"It's play to them. They don't really care if property rights ain't respected; they're just havin' fun. Suppose somebody was threatening your precious section of land, Tim Larkin, instead of our slaves that's our property just the same as your acres?"

Tim cleared his throat. He did wish Mima would hold her tongue here before the children.

"See, Pap, he hasn't got a word to say. He's just like all these other men who own land instead of slaves. And Ma says herself that he's got a white hand on his place that's equal to a slave any day—only he doesn't have to report to the patrol officers, and if he was hurt or killed Tim wouldn't have to bear the loss!"

She must be speaking of Newby! Why, if Tim hadn't kept him on after he lost his forty acres, where would he be now with all those children? As it stood, he was working every day, getting plenty of food and keep for his kids, and none of the risks.

Tim looked across at Polly, as if he expected her to defend him. But once Polly had accused him of foreclosing on Newby before he actually needed to, so maybe she agreed with Mima.

"Tim don't own a whole section of land," Polly said with an independent twist of her mouth. "I own twenty-five acres."

It was as if Polly had suddenly appeared with a good strong smell of fish to upset the hounds.

"What do you mean, Polly Arnett?"

Mima didn't scent the fish smell as fish. Tim could see that.

"I mean all that section of land you're talking about isn't Tim's, I own twenty-five acres and a house."

"Which," said Mrs. Arnett, rising so fast that the ruffle on

her silk cap fluttered, "*she* rents to Harmony Blankinship—of all people."

"Harmony Blankinship?" Mima looked puzzled for a moment. "I remember her, dimples, and no stays, and blue eyes, and a way with men."

"Yes." Mrs. Arnett swept from the room.

Tim suspected the smell of frying chicken had almost as much to do with her leaving as her subject.

"I get my rent in sewing for the boys and fancy ironing. She can do Honey Love's petticoats better than any colored girl I ever had."

Tim wanted to walk across the room and take Polly's hand. He knew she had deliberately brought up this painful subject to get the talk away from war. He doubted very much if he could ever live up to Polly.

And now her father was saying: "Timothy, I want you to come see some of my new peach trees. They're bearin' for the first time this year."

Tim got Old Man Arnett's cane and crutch from beside the settle, and the two went out through the kitchen, where the steps were made especially for the crippled man to take.

A little Negro who had been playing beside the back door ran to open the gate for his master.

"That's better, Corp," Mr. Arnett said. "His mammy had to switch him yesterday for bein' too lazy to open the door."

Tim wondered how it would feel to be responsible for this whole colony of black people who sat around their cabins and took their rest in the sun today.

"How many slaves did you bring from Kentucky?"

Tim had heard this story before, but he knew his father-in-law liked to recite it.

"Six," the old man said, "Wes and Charlotte, house servants, their two children, and a couple of field hands. I bought Bulah the first year after we got settled. Judge Wayford owned her, and Polk was always runnin' off over there to see her, so I just

swapped around with the Judge. Gave him a couple of colts and two hundred dollars for Bulah. That little Corp is one of Bulah's grandsons."

"Altogether how many slaves have you had here?"

"Oh, I'd have to do some countin' back. I've sold three down the river." His voice was almost sad. "And one to Judge Wayford to marry his Porter, and one awful mistake—a girl I thought Rusty Lewis aimed to keep for a house servant with his Biddy, and he sold her. After that I wouldn't trust Rusty with popcorn."

Tim was trying to recall some of the slaves. He remembered two who were sold down the river; they were brothers and went around starting fights and joining each other to clean up. Mr. Arnett had paid out more good money for doctors' bills to patch up the victims of those two!

"Wes was just my age, and he and Charlotte had four children. Charlotte was such a good cook besides being a good nurse for all but Mima."

"How many field hands do you have now—good active ones?"

"Well, I'd say eight. In hemp season I hire out all eight of them, after they get my hemp done. They all make money for themselves then. Duke (Bulah's oldest boy) made enough to buy himself a good horse. After he got that horse I kind of made him my overseer. I figure I'm gettin' old to look after everything."

Mr. Arnett led up to a row of peach trees that weren't higher than Tim's head.

"These are the ones. Wes is as proud of this orchard as I am. He's helped bud and trim it. We call these the old Arnett peaches. I brought the stones from Kentucky, and we've improved on 'em, which is sayin' somethin' because the way you remember a thing as a young un is apt to be mighty exaggerated."

The conversation went on to fruits and orchards, until the dinner bell warned them to be getting back to the house.

"Tim," Old Man Arnett balanced himself on his crutch and cane, so that he could wipe the sweat band of his straw hat, "I want you to know that no matter how you decide to go in this war, it's your own business."

"Yes sir."

"You was brought up different from my children."

Tim felt sorry for his father-in-law. He wanted the worst way to be able to say he would go fight for the South.

"Maybe you've been wise to stay shy of slavery. You can see for you'self that I've got more niggers than I know what to do with. I was countin' up last week and they's twelve young uns under fourteen year old. That's too many, Tim. If I could get all the slaves out of the state, somewhere off so they could work out their own future, I'd sign mine over, all except Wes and Charlotte and maybe Big Duke. But to free these slaves with no plan, Tim, it can't be done. It would ruin us all, even you that has got only propity and no human chattels."

As Tim sat down to the table he realized with shocked surprise that it had been set big enough to accommodate all the children except the baby. A great, long table with only two men sitting there—and one of them a cripple.

This was War.

Tim resolved to keep the talk away from war. He was going to make Mima's little redheaded boy laugh again, and Honey Love forget what she'd heard from Mima's oldest, Marybell. The minute the blessing was said, Tim took the talk and made it his. He managed to get the little Percy to ask questions, and he even made the solemn-eyed Marybell laugh when he told stories of California. His own children were as interested as always, Timmy saying, "Tell about the time you buried your gold to keep that thievin' grocer from takin' it, and forgot where it was."

The story was long and full of detail, with imitations of three or four men talking. Tim always said "skipit" when he meant

the grocer was swearing. The fried-chicken platter had been refilled, and seconds had been heaped on the children's plates before Tim got down to the story of Burgess and the way he walked in his tight, pointed shoes—Tim crooking his fingers and walking them spraddle-legged on Mrs. Arnett's fine linen cloth.

"You talk like so many different people," Marybell said. "Can you talk like us here?"

Tim became self-conscious.

Arnett said, "He can talk like Gramma Arnett."

"Let's heah him!" that lady commanded, her mouth suddenly drawn over her too obviously new uppers.

"Now, Mrs. Arnett you know I cain't soun' like you!" He'd already said the "I cain't" in her Kentucky drawl.

"He did, he did," Mima chanted.

"Talk like Charlottel!" Timmy called.

This Tim could do without embarrassment.

The children were dawdling over their peach fluff pie. They had been so entertained that they hadn't remembered to ask to leave the table before the adults were through. Good humor was equal to the good taste they carried in their mouths. Even Mrs. Arnett wasn't too irritated at the thought of Tim imitating her.

Wes came in from the front hall and waited for an opening in the talk. "Mist' Timothy, they's a man in the house to see you, an' I thinks he's yo' brothah, Mist' Perry."

Tim couldn't keep his eyes from seeking Mima. Afterwards, he hated himself. It was just another case of getting a smutty idea in your mind and letting it start to smoke up all the rest. He wished he could tell Mima that he didn't think he was any kind of a saint to pass judgment on her. Suppose she knew about Harmony's money.

Mima caught her breath as if she'd been hit. "P-Perry Larkin? C-can you imagine him comin' home? I thought he lived in Jefferson City."

"He does," Polly said. "Maybe that's why he's here now."

"Who's Perry, Mommy?" Marybell wanted to know.

Tim suddenly wished that all little hedgerow babies could be as free as Marybell. Tim started for the door but didn't get through before Marybell repeated her question.

It was Honey Love who finally answered, "That's my uncle. Onct he sent my granma a box of dried figs and a breast pin." Honey Love was getting down from the table, her long muslin dress hooked up on her chair so you could see her pretty little legs in their white cotton stockings. "I haven't even seen him myself to remember."

"He don't look like Uncle Drew and Pa," Arnett said. "He don't wear a beard, and his eyes are kind of sad. Grandma's got his picture."

Arnett and Timmy were pushing into the front room along with the little girls.

"I guess we might's well go in too," Mrs. Arnett told her daughters after she had finished drinking her tea. "I've allus been suspicious that somebody drove Perry Larkin out of the country—he left too quick for anybody so nachehly lazy."

Mima was wiping the face and hands of her second little girl. "But, Mommy, you hurt!"

"Never mind," Mima set her down out of her chair with unnecessary vigor, "run along."

"I've been so mad at Perry in my day," Polly said, "that I'd like to horsewhip him myself, but I've allus been so relieved, Mima, that you didn't get mixed up with him that I've made Drew and Tim bend over backwards payin' him out of scrapes."

Mr. Arnett reached for his crutches. "I allus did say you got the pick of the Larkins, Polly."

As Tim went into the Arnetts' big front room, Perry came toward him.

"I saw that wagon out front," Perry said, "and I just 'lowed it was yours."

Perry, just a bit under thirty-one, was as slender and graceful as ever. His soft brown hair was growing thin at the part, but his waxed mustache drooped only enough to accent his dreamy eyes and fine features. He was wearing tan broadcloth pants that looked neat and clean in spite of the fact he must have had a long trip today. His coat was hardly wrinkled at the elbows.

Tim wondered what a figure he must cut before this fine brother of his.

Their hands clasped; the horny, big hand of the farmer gripped the slender, light hand of the professional gambler, or maybe boardinghouse proprietor, or even actor.

Tim did not know what Perry was doing now.

"Mighty glad to see you, Perry," Tim said.

"Same here. Ma said if I didn't find you at home I'd likely find you here. This bein' closest, I dropped by first."

So Perry had already been to Ma's.

"When did you git in?"

"Last night. Jefferson City is held by Frank Blair. It ain't enough that the Blairs have got a puppet in the shape of this ugly son of toil, Lincoln. They got to have one in Missouri."

Perry still spoke with the slow, lazy voice that Tim had remembered, but there was an edge to it; fear or irritation along with the sarcasm.

"And Boonville's been took over by a little redheaded, red-bearded ball of fire from Connecticut, Nathaniel Lyon!" If we Missourians is aimin' to wake up some mornin' curryin' all the horses fer somebody else to ride, all right! Otherwise we'd better be linin' up behind Gov'nor Claib Jackson or Sterlin' Price."

So Blair and Lyon had managed to get control of the state government for the Union.

"You aimin' to?" Tim asked.

"Soon's I get some little business matters settled."

Tim had a dozen guesses in his mind.

"Who in hell—all these kids?" Perry said under his breath when he became conscious of his big-eyed audience. "Don't tell me, Tim, that this litter is yours?"

"All but three of 'em." Tim looked at Perry as much as he dared when he added the rest. "Them three there is Mima's."

Like little chickens will sometimes cluster as if they have sorted themselves as to color, so these children stood. The two blackheaded Larkin boys, the lighthaired Honey Love and little George, the two little redheads, with Marybell standing apart to stare at this strange man who was their close kin.

"Is—is she Mima's oldest?" Perry asked, pointing to Marybell.

"Yes." Of course the fact that Perry didn't know that Tim knew made everything easy and all right.

"Howdy, sissy," Perry held out his smooth hand to Marybell.

Tim thought there was something of sadness in the way Perry lingered before the solemn-eyed child. As Tim looked at both of them he knew that not even wise Arnett could see a resemblance. After all, Marybell's Grandpap Arnett had big solemn eyes.

Perry made comments to the children that made Tim remember he had a couple or three stepchildren.

"Did you bring your family?" Tim asked as he continued to introduce the children.

"No." Perry sounded short.

Mrs. Arnett and her two daughters came into the room, and so the whole group changed and circled, until Perry now stood before Mima.

"How d'y'do, Perry," Mima said. Her high color was gone, but her plump, young face was in perfect composure. "Now don't *you* say Ma looks younger than either of her daughters."

"How d'y'do, Mima, I was just about to." He winked at Mrs. Arnett in a confidential way and turned to Polly to put a brotherly kiss on her forehead. "You've kept mighty pretty, Polly, in spite of all these five young uns."

He didn't know just how much he owed to Polly, but by his sudden show of attendance upon her, anybody would have thought he did, and was trying to make it up to her.

And so all of Tim's work at dinner to make the children forget the war was lost, for Perry was full of the subject. He even told of passing dead and wounded outside Boonville, and how Lyon could act quicker than any general, but that Claib Jackson had been quicker—he'd got away with all the money in the treasury to buy supplies for the state troops. Those who were in the know would tell you Jackson had been to Memphis to get quick aid from the South, and before you could say Jack Robinson and hang a rope around his neck, Missouri would be seceded with her other sister states instead of like some kind of a bastard up here alone.

Honey Love came and stood beside her pap, and Tim could see that she wasn't missing a word, so he suggested they'd better all be starting home.

"Jackson offered a fine enough plan to Blair and Lyon—protection for all them that had Union leanin's, but no troops for the Federal government," Perry said. "I guess Lyon knows more ways of bein' insultin' than anybody else, in fact he turned around the room and pointed 'em out that he'd see 'em all dead and buried before he'd give in to the state."

Perry followed them to the spring wagon and then off down the road beside them on his horse, continuing the story, in spots bloody, always exciting. To hear him talk you might have thought he owned fifty slaves instead of none in his life.

The only thing Tim had about which to be really grateful was the fact that the four Arnett boys didn't come thumping in from their drilling to brag what they would do to the Feds when they caught them, or to abolitionists they could find running around loose.

That night Tim couldn't sleep. The next morning he was already tired when he took Newby and went off to help one

of his neighbors put up hay. They carried scythes that glittered in the light. Newby looked older than Tim, but when the two worked together you had to marvel at the smaller man's stamina. He could work beside Tim without condescension on Tim's part, cradling grain or scything hay. Sometimes Tim wished he didn't talk so much, but he was always glad to have such a good hand living on the place.

"Tim, I 'low we uns is the only ones in this bunch that ain't slavocrats," Newby said as they jogged their team over the rough lanes, "and I ain't afeard to tell 'em what I think of 'em either."

"You'd better hold your peace, Zeb. These ain't times when a feller can say what he thinks and knock the whey out of the feller that objects."

"I tell you, I'm not afeard." Newby still had a high color, and his stubby features looked as if they might have been even more blunted by getting into and being put out of other people's business. "It ain't that I'm a abolitionist. Let 'em keep their house servants; but it ain't fair to white men to keep breedin' up them black devils to take over white men's work. Let 'em break hemp, yes, but hell, a white man can plant corn any day in a straighter row than a black. Why? Because the white man is doin' his best so's he'll have victuals and duds for his wife and young uns, while the black man is just gittin' by so he won't git whoopped at night."

"Oh, I wouldn't be that hard," Tim said. "I'll bet there ain't a nigger at Arnett's with marks on his back."

"Arnett's! That old man's a cripple and scared plumb to death of them niggers of hisn. He bribes 'em with victuals till you'd think they'd bust. He ain't no example. Take Rusty Lewis if you want to talk slave talk."

Tim remembered that Rusty had sold one of Old Man Arnett's slaves to New Orleans.

"Rusty Lewis freezes and starves his black people, and yet

the poor sinners is so plumb beat out they ain't got the heart to run away."

Twice during the day Tim told Newby he'd better talk less, there were too many men listening. Tim would try to joke Newby's talk away, but nobody paid attention. One of Tim's neighbors came to Tim about four o'clock and suggested Tim had better send Newby home early to do up the chores.

Newby didn't like going ahead of Tim. In fact, he made objections. "It makes me look like I can't stand the same pace as you bigger fellers."

But Tim overruled all of them. "Now you know that ain't it," Tim said. "There's work here till plumb up dark, and we can't risk lettin' this hay lay."

So Newby went off toward home carrying his scythe.

It was almost dark when Tim started for home, through the lane edged on both sides by timber that left only an aisle of sky above, where one bright star shone. Tomorrow he'd promised to go help another farmer, one who had no slaves but who felt Governor Jackson was right and who had three sons training in a brigade.

How long would all of this keep up? A man could take all his time just trying to keep away from argument. Tim knew why he had changed his mind on the business of state sovereignty. It was because Stephen A. Douglas had backed Lincoln at the last, after Lincoln became President. Douglas killed himself by overwork trying to convince men who had voted for him to support Lincoln now! Why couldn't the Missourians see?

Tim wasn't prepared for his team to rear and snort and plunge about until Tim had to leap from the wagon and run to grab their bridles. "Whoa—Molly, whoa, Tip," Tim started talking to his mules. It wasn't time of year for a wildcat or wolf to be prowling around dangerous. Yet up here in front of the team Tim could smell something strange. It wasn't some bruised weeds, or a foul scented bush, it wasn't even a foul smell.

Tim thought first of his brothers. Drew had already been thrown and was limping with a sore knee. He was breaking a colt. Oh, God, don't let it be Drew. Not Drew. Tim was running ahead in the near darkness, afraid for every step that he would stumble over someone, but most of all Drew, alone in this lane, dying, maybe already too late for help to save.

And then he almost tripped. He saved himself from falling flat by putting out his arms.

There.

He could not see beyond the fact that it was a human form, lumped forward. He caught his breath and slowly reached out his hand. His blood seemed to have stopped in his veins, ready to burst out through his skin, to pour from his eyes and ears and nose, but he could not endure the active suspension. He heard a shriek that would have chilled a steady spine, and then realized that it had come from his own throat to start again his heart to pounding.

His hand felt first a shoulder. And then he knew that hurry might be important. He tore at the coarse shirt to turn the man over. If it were Drew, he'd gone off in his work clothes.

Tim's hands were cautious, because his imagination swam this body in gaping wounds, but he had to know the face. He ran his fingers over the shoulder to the neck, up the side of the neck, all the time chilled and nauseated. He'd know Drew's beard, his sharp, hard nose. And then he heard another smothered scream, for his hands went off in space.

"Jesus God! No head!"

Tim's nausea became a fact.

This was no man thrown from a horse. Light seemed to splinter before Tim's eyes, the gleam of light on swinging scythes. Before Tim felt the head far to the right, with its blunted nose, he knew who it was that lay dead in the road. And he knew too that he would have to tell Newby's wife and hear his children cry and then help to dig a grave and lay this faithful, stubborn fellow in it, for the neighbors would be afraid

to come. He sank again to his knees, and this time he knew he could never rise of his own accord; he wasn't man enough to take on this task alone. He wished he had even learned some of Old Man Arnett's prayers, and then from some cranny in his mind he heard the old man reading from Deuteronomy, "And the cause that is too hard for you ye shall bring unto me, and I will hear it."

And Tim rose and took off his shirt and wrapped it about the head that had been Newby's.

Tim sat before Harmony Blankinship's fireplace and drank the hot coffee she gave him. He had her red shawl pinned over his bare shoulders, and yet on this June night he shook as if his bones would shatter.

"I'm sorry the coffee ain't stronger," Harmony said, "you've had a scare that would turn a man's hair gray."

"It ain't that," Tim chattered. "It was more the ride through the woods with the mules runnin' l-like they was possessed, and me standin' up there wet from hayin' and naked to the w-waist."

He had seen Harmony's light and had taken sudden hope. He wouldn't have to go alone to tell Newby's wife, and he could send for Drew by one of Harmony's boys and for Nigger Polk by the other one if he didn't tell them first what happened. He knew they would never go out in the dark if they had learned that Newby's body was there in the wagon.

It was hard to explain his shirtless condition, but the boys had taken the word as truth that his team had run away and he'd had only his shirt to tear up to mend the harness. That also accounted for the fact that he wanted Drew to bring along his best leather lines.

"I knowed they was more than you said, when you mentioned wantin' them lines, Tim Larkin," Harmony said as she piled wood on her fire. "But I don't see how you count on you and Drew buryin' Zeb Newby this night. You'd ort to go git the

sheriff. Did it ever come to your mind that somebody might think you'd killed Zeb and disposed of his body?"

"Oh, Harmony, don't name such a thing! People in this community would know I wouldn't hurt Zeb; there wouldn't be no reason. He's been my hand for five or six years. And a better hand there never breathed. Why, I bet I never had a better friend, or a man I could depend on, unless it was Drew." Tim's eyes were wet.

"But these ain't regular times," Harmony said, "and just because you give a church and buryin' ground to the community ain't no reasonable sign they ain't plenty of them would suspect you of murder and help to knot a rope around your neck—maybe the very one that swung that scythe against Newby."

Tim had stopped shaking. The feeling of horror that poured over him was more paralyzing. He looked about Harmony's cabin as if for some way of escape. The three youngest of Harmony's children lay in the trundle bed and slept in their innocence. Why, if the world was as evil and uncertain, would human beings let their young live? His little Honey Love! He groaned and put his hands over his face.

"You know, to be honest, Tim, I onct thought you must be a murderer, else why would you pay off that forty-dollar mortgage and buy that horse and move me down here in this house that you'd just bought and give me a good cow without askin' or takin'," Harmony paused and looked toward the door as if she had been suddenly threatened, "without takin' so much as a kiss—unless you was hidin' somethin'?"

Tim groaned again. If he could only tell Harmony now, why he'd felt compelled to be so good to her! He could give her the hundred and sixty acres of land he'd bought with her two hundred, wipe the slate clean, because it would surely be with interest a plenty—land he'd cleared, backbreaking, heartwearing, grubbing, and chopping.

"I allus knowed it wasn't just because you was so much in love with Polly, or that you was some kind of a saint and

couldn't see another woman. I've watched your eyes." Harmony stood in front of him, but there was nothing seductive in her pose. It was as if she had come to the necessity for reason.

Tim wished he could stop her from talking.

"Polly's all right, but compared to me, she's mighty skim milk. I don't know why I'm talkin' this way now with Newby out there, unless it's to put off havin' to tell his wife, or because it's about the first time you've ever been in my house without one or two of your young uns along. Tim, tell me what is it?"

"A man with a family ain't got time and don't dare take the risk of stealin' pleasures," Tim made himself answer her after a long pause.

"Sometimes I think you just sunk all your desires in that place of yours," Harmony sounded sad. "You'd allus liked me, Tim. It's made me mad time and ag'in that you was so solid set against me. If you killed Blank fer his gold and are tryin' to make it up to me, I'd be obliged to know."

Tim took the cup from the table again. He had to hold onto something to keep his hands steady. "Blank went to Australy," Tim said. "I didn't kill him. If you thought I did, then there must be others that thought the same, and it would be easy for them to fasten this new guilt on me. I reckon there ain't but three other men in this neighborhood besides me strong enough to swing a scythe that hard, and two of 'em's got more sympathizin' friends than Drew and me put together. The other man's Big Duke—Old Man Arnett's head nigger, and I know he didn't do it."

"You mean you wouldn't risk a trial?" Harmony's blue eyes showed the terror Tim felt.

"No, not with my shirt bloodstained, and the bottom of my wagon. I'd made up my mind when I got the team started home that I'd go fight. A home ain't worth havin' if you can't go in and out of it in broad daylight. I knowed Polly's brothers would see that she was safer without me."

He couldn't go on telling Harmony, because the lump in his throat wouldn't let him say that he'd got so much from this land of freedom that even if Newby wasn't dead he'd have to go and pay something back.

Tim stood up. He looked like a scarecrow there in the firelight. The red shawl made his shadow look like a gigantic old woman on the ceiling and wall. "There'll be a late moon tonight, and we can bury Newby in the Lord's acre and replace the sod."

"Oh, Tim, you're takin' too much on yourself."

"No. Go find the carpenter and git him started makin' a box."

"The carpenter, as you call him, is gone to war," Harmony said. "Never owned a slave in his life, but he don't aim that Missouri should be browbeat by no gover'ment."

"Harmony," Tim put out his hand to steady himself against the table, "what side are you on?"

"Right now, Tim Larkin, I'm on your side."

"Thanks, Harmony. I reckon, then, you wouldn't want to see me hung for a murder I ain't done."

"I'd almost sooner hang myself, Tim, if it wasn't fer these young uns of mine that would need me."

There was nothing jolly and dimpled about Harmony tonight. Tim wished the horse trader, or the carpenter, or even Blank Blankinship had been good enough for her.

"I 'low you'd better walk on down to the Newbys'," Tim told her. His voice was hushed. "I'll wait here for Polk and be right down to tell her. I wish I'd asked Polly to come too."

"If I know Polly, she'll be with Polk."

And Harmony was right.

"I knowed somethin' terrible had happened," Polly said as she came into Harmony's little cabin. "This boy couldn't tell me anything except that your team had run away with you and you'd tore up your shirt."

Polly stood there, trim as a dove, and looked at Tim in Harmony's shawl. Then she must have realized that Tim couldn't

tell her before this twelve-year-old boy, so she sent him for fresh water from the spring.

"Drew's best leather lines," Polly said when the boy was gone. "You don't ask to borry even your brother's best leather lines for but one thing."

"I know," Tim said. "And you're right, it's to let a body down into a grave. Somebody has killed Zeb Newby with a scythe, and Harmony thinks we should send for the sheriff so's the neighbors won't think I done it."

"Oh, Tim!" Polly bit at her lip and caught Tim's hand.

"Have you sent word to Pa's?"

"No, just Drew!"

Polly didn't question why he didn't get word to the Arnetts'. Tim knew by the sudden draining of the color from her face that she had his same fear.

"If you make a mystery out of somethin' it's a lot apter to put people's tongues to clackin'," Polly said. "Harmony's right for ordinary times, but Tim! Oh Tim!" Her voice caught in her throat, "Who all knows besides Harmony?"

"Them that done it, I reckon."

"You can trust Harmony, can't you?"

Tim didn't get quite what Polly meant. "Yes. But there's the Newbys. Their oldest boy is sixteen, and he might get to think-in'."

"We got to risk that. But Tim, it might just as easy been you that was killed. This is worse than war, when you can't even tell what your nearest neighbor will do next." Polly started to cry, then straightened her face by an effort that Tim had learned to understand. "But there's poor Zeb outside, and Mrs. Newby likely stokin' up a fire to keep his supper hot."

"Harmony's already down there waitin' for me to come and help her tell." He took Polly's arm and was astonished by its frailness compared to her strength. They went out into the night. The bright star that had shown above the aisle of trees had moved almost beyond their view.

"I wish we dared get Wes to make a coffin, but do you think Mrs. Newby would be satisfied if we wrapped him in my rose of Sharon quilt?"

Oh, Tim was grateful for Polly here beside him, thinking ahead while he caught his breath.

"Polly, if the Lord brings me back safe," Tim said with husky slowness, "I'll move off that log church up there and build one of fine sawed lumber, even if I have to haul it clear from Liberty." Tim felt the Lord would hear. "And we'll put up a monument to Zeb when this is all over."

"Poor Mrs. Newby."

"But I guess when we're finished with tonight I'd better take off to Boonville or sommers where I won't apt have to fight against your brothers. If I joined up at Cameron with the home guards, I'd be in and out with time to look after the place——"

"And maybe like Newby have to be buried by dark without a preacher or a funeral. No, Tim, I can see you better be leavin' before news gets around. You've been too prosperous to have too many friends. Good honest killin' in the open where you get a chance is better than this sneakin' murder. I've been knowin' how you felt about slavery for years." There was a sob in Polly's voice. "I'll make it right with Pa. The rest of them won't likely forgive you ever, Tim, no matter which side comes out on top."

The last quarter of a moon had seen them through the burying, and now Tim Larkin, riding the youngest mule, was on his way after he'd told Polly and his sleeping young ones good-by.

If Lonesome had been ten years younger and any color except white, Tim would have taken him, but a man didn't want to be riding a white animal to war, much less one that was too old for hard use.

To war!

It had come close to Tim in such short order that he could hardly believe it was less than two days ago that he had tried

so hard to keep talk of it away from his children at the dinner table. A bit earlier in the day he had walked with Honey Love through the orchard, sweet with plenty.

Tim turned his mule off the lane to go in among his trees once more. The moon gave scant light, but there was enough to make shadows and spaces. He tied the mule to the gate and walked on alone through the dew-wet grass.

He felt so chilled and silent that he wondered if he would ever again be able to know the difference between pain and happiness. Tomorrow he could not stand here in the sun to eat a warm apple, or dodge a swooping bee, or take the hand of Honey Love. He felt himself swerve from the thought as from briars in a berry patch. Tomorrow or any other day.

This orchard had grown in his mind when he was in California as he panned gold in cold water; it had blossomed when he first broke the ground; it had borne fruit when he still had to brace the tender switches and wrap them against rabbits and frost. Now that it was a reality he could only fill his pockets and depart before he grew soft with sadness.

This country was like an orchard. It wasn't always as people saw it today. Once it had been a few little switches that had required tender care, and now that the switches had grown to great fruitful trees, there were those who thought they could dig them up and plant them in different soil at a strange angle before wind and sun and rain. Or maybe these people thought they could build a fence high enough to set it apart to keep a canker worm in check.

Missouri was the fine Early June apple tree to Tim. He could see it now beset by canker. He'd worked with orchards long enough to know you couldn't shut your mind to canker. You had to cut it out and burn it in a flame. Sometimes much of good had to go to get out all the bad.

He filled his pockets with apples. He had no taste for them now, but with daylight he knew his appetite would come.

PART VI

June 1861

TIM HAD PLANNED to cross the river at Sibley, but once on a boat, decided he'd make the trip to Boonville by water. And now, once again, Timothy Larkin was leaning against the rail of a river boat.

Tim's beard was probably the most changed, if one hunted outward change in the man. Polly had urged him to wear it shorter, and he oiled it often enough to keep it soft. It was certainly no less black, and still made his eyes look bluer by contrast. His shoulders could stoop as sullenly or draw back in broad threatening strength, and his long legs still carried him up and down the boat with a sauntering stride that looked slow until one of shorter leg tried to keep up.

The greatest change in Timothy Larkin was the despair that gripped his mind. There was none of the eagerness that drove him to buy a mule, to ride off into a wilderness that he might not have to mark time. Each moment the boat laid over at a landing was to the good for Tim Larkin. It left him that much

longer close to his land, the house he had built, his family, the places he knew and loved, which might all be changed when he got back if he ever did.

He was glad his ma had come along with Drew to Harmony's, because otherwise he'd have had to go off without her blessing. Besides it had been Ma who had made Mrs. Newby see that haste and secrecy were important.

"You've got to look at your neighbors tomorrow mornin'," Ma had said, "look 'em in the eye and tell 'em your man has gone to war. That surely wouldn't be harder, Mrs. Newby, than havin' to tell 'em the truth."

Tim could see his mother as she'd sat in the Arnetts' front room and told them her husband would be coming along in a day or two. The picture had faded in his mind; he couldn't remember just what she wore, but he could see the way her face had lighted up when she spoke of Patrick Larkin.

"So long as folks don't know how you hurt inside your mind, Mrs. Newby, it's easy to smile and let on you're happy," Ma had said in one breath, and in the next: "An', Tim, you have Polk go kill a pig and we'll haul half of it home in your wagon so's there won't be ar'y question about what's there stainin' the boards. We'll stop and give a neighbor a good-sized piece of the fresh meat to be sure it's talked about."

Poor Polk had worked so hard that Drew had at last finished digging the grave, because the poor Negro was so scared and worn-out. Drew had offered to go down and kill the pig, but Polk had clutched at his shirt front.

"No, Mist' Drew, don't leave me be here alone."

"There ain't nothin' goin' to hurt you. These people around here is dead; they *can't* hurt you."

"I ain't scaid what they's goin' to do to me—I'm scaid of what they make me do to myself."

Long years from now Drew would tell that story and people would laugh, but last night it was spine-chilling and sad.

"Stranger, where are you bound?"

Tim awoke from his painful daydream and looked at the man at his elbow. He was not so tall as Tim, but he looked strong for his size, and though Tim couldn't be positive what it was, something about the man reminded him of Newby. Tim felt a shiver, as if someone had walked across Newby's newly hidden grave.

"I 'low to go to Boonville," Tim said.

"Me too." The man took out a plug of tobacco and offered it to Tim.

"I think I'll smoke." And then remembering the rule of hospitality that made a man accept anything offered in a move to friendship, "I spent a couple o' years in Californy in the old days and my back teeth ain't what they was. You smoke?"

Tim loaded his pipe and lighted up. Even tobacco had lost its savor.

"I got out of the habit of smokin' in war in Kansas, and before that, war in Mexico. You can chew all night if you want and not give y'self away to the enemy."

"That's sure right."

"You aimin' to join up?"

Such an open question deserved an evasive answer, though the very fact that he was headed for Boonville labeled him as a Unionist. Before Tim could shape an answer, the stranger had gone on.

"I 'lowed, if you did, I might make you acquainted with some-thin' to your advantage."

Tim became instantly suspicious.

"See that leg?" The stranger slapped his thigh, "Broke plumb in two when a horse fell on me, otherwise I'd never of been left in Kansas when Nat Lyon was transferred to St. Louie."

Tim thought it wasn't going to cost him anything to listen to the man's story.

"Nat's been through West Point, but it ain't made him proud like it would some men. Now take Sterlin' Price, fer instance, if I hadn't already served with Lyon in Kansas I'd sign up with

Price. He's kept common too, but some of these fellows it makes so proud they hesitate to spit."

"But Price and Lyon are on different sides. You mean you ain't heard that Price is gittin' up a army to make the state go from the Union?"

"One way or the other, don't matter to me as long as they's a good fight."

Tim wished Newby had known this man, and maybe had managed to get the fight out his system so he wouldn't have had to talk so much.

"It ain't that way with Lyon. Why he's so ag'in' slavery he'd lay down and let them Blair boys cut his head off at the neck if he thought it would do his cause any good."

Tim wanted to be sick.

"You ever fought in ary war?"

"No," Tim said. "Unless you'd call the three skirmishes we had with Indians on our wagon train to Californy in '50."

"You go there?"

"Yes."

"Git any gold?"

"Yes."

"By gravy, I told them infidels they could have got gold if they'd jist stayed long enough. Well, if you've skirmished with Indians I guess you won't be too pore a soldier." The stranger brought himself back to his topic on war. "Half of these that's enlistin' don't know what they're gittin' into."

"I sure know what roughin' it is," Tim said. "I was scout on this wagon train."

"You don't say!" The blunt features seemed to take on a new shine. "You don't know nothin' about the part of Missouri south of the river, do you?"

"I'd ort to. Rode back catty corner across the state in '52 from New Madrid to Sibley." Tim was beginning to enjoy his companion.

"What on?"

"A pacin' mule," Tim laughed. "And I brought a pacin' mule with me."

"Say," the stranger spat his cud of tobacco over the rail and eyed Tim. "You may be jist the man Lyon is lookin' fer."

"How do you know what he's lookin' fer if you haven't been with him since he came to St. Louie?"

"Now here, stranger, you act like you suspicioned me!" The man drew off and whetted his chin whiskers with a hard hand.

"Not at all."

"You'd be surprised if I told you this was the last boat that's goin' to pass from Kansas City to St. Louie without special papers, wouldn't ye? Well, I know as tomorrow Lyon's new orders is to go into effect."

Tim wanted to calm the man.

"And when I first clapped eyes on you I could see you straddle of a lazy mule findin' out more in one hour than twelve of these up-and-comin' young bucks could do in a week. A body just has to look at you and know you're plumb able to take care o' yourself."

Tim held out his hand. "It's sprinklin' again, we'd better go below."

The stranger followed him.

"It's this eternal weather that's holdin' up Lyon too. I knowed one feller down to Monterey in the Mexican War that wouldn't ever let weather stop him, name of Grant. 'By lightnin',' he'd say, 'war can't wait on weather.' I tell you what I seen him do onct. That was at Monterey too—we was gettin' out of ammunition—he jumped on a horse and rode like a Comanche Indian, holdin' himself on his saddle with one knee and his body over on the off side of that horse. He was a devil for danger—that Grant was. Could ride ary horse that ever walked on four legs. I wonder what ever became of him. Probably done like Price and Lee and some of the rest—gone to fight for the seceshes."

Tim was almost getting tired of so much talk, but this soldier

acted as if he could find a place for him with Lyon or some of the top men where there'd be no question of his being kept off in some corner of the state to wear out his boot soles training to march like a tin soldier, or chasing after bushwhackers that melted, come daylight. Now that he'd left home, given up all he had so he could fight, he wanted that fight to mean something.

"Can you talk like a south Missourian?" the stranger asked Tim suddenly.

"I 'low as how I could if I had a farr in my pipe to warm my nose."

The stranger laughed at Tim's imitation of the drawl. "You don't have to change your talk much. How would you talk if you was droppin' in on a Cass County lady?"

Tim remembered the blushing Percy Downing who had married Mima, and gave his talk as well as he could remember it.

"Say, I wouldn't put it past you to already be a spy and tryin' to get somethin' over on me. I got half a notion to have you put in chains."

"My name's Larkin," Tim said, not exactly scared of the blunt-featured soldier, but unwilling to land in jail. "I came from Clay County because I'm about the only Union man left in the district."

"All right, but if you're honest you wouldn't mind lettin' me see for myself if them whiskers of yours is real."

Tim let out a laugh that surprised himself.

"Never mind! Them whiskers is just the kind a person tryin' to disguise himself would think up."

The stranger was so serious that Tim urged the man to pull his beard.

"Keep it dyed?"

"No, I got a brother at home with a beard just as black." Tim was still chuckling to himself.

"You'll meet up with stranger folks than me," the man said.

"I guess I'd ort to expose my name. Jones, it is—Dudfield Jones—Duffy for short. I'm mighty glad to meet you, Larkin."

Tim didn't quite know whether to believe Duffy's story about General Lyon or to take it with a mighty big pinch of salt. He'd heard before of people who bragged about knowing certain people of importance, until the people of importance came on the scene and failed to recognize even acquaintances, much less confidential friends.

Perry had called Lyon a fireball.

Sometimes Perry was right.

"If you ain't afraid of the great in the flesh," Duffy said, "I'll take you direct to Lyon."

Tim thought he might as well call the tough one's bluff. "Sure, if you're certain he won't be mad at you for bringin' along a stranger." Tim was definitely sarcastic.

But late that evening Tim talked out of the other side of his mouth when he found himself surrounded by men in uniform and standing in front of a table behind which sat a less-than-average-size man with a tough, sandy beard and blue eyes.

"If it isn't Duffy Jones!" the man behind the table said as he rose and extended his hand. "You said you'd be able to walk again! I never doubted it for a moment."

"Sure, General, though I can't maybe march as I could at Monterey, I could ride a horse from dawn to dark, scoutin'."

There was such a wishful smile on the ugly man's face that even Tim was touched.

"But I'm short of horses; can't even get enough to move my supplies from here to Osceola," the general said, "though goodness knows what I'll do to get them across the Osage with all these rains putting rivers beyond banks."

Tim liked his talk. It was Eastern and quick and so full of energy that Tim wondered the orderlies could ever break from attention in his presence.

"Ain't you even got a mule I could ride?" Duffy begged.

"You don't aim to tell me that you can't even stir out a mule for one of your scouts. You don't suppose Claib Jackson would hesitate for want of a mule if there was one that could be commandeered."

"None of that, Duffy. We've got to keep the Missourians on our side, not antagonize them and drive them into Price's army and thus to secession."

"I forgot!" Duffy swung his hat with a gesture of disgust. "I found you another scout to go with me. His name's Larkin and he's already got a mule and can talk like a Missourian in four or five different accents."

General Nathaniel Lyon's quick smile took in Larkin, but his businesslike hurry let Tim know that he should take no extra time.

"Me and my mule are at your service, General," Tim heard himself actually talking to the great man who had taken Camp Jackson, Jefferson City, Boonville, and now planned to make the entire state safe for the Union.

"If Duffy Jones says you're a scout, I won't argue. Orderly! give these two men what they need—including a mule, if a bony one is to be found that you feel isn't strong enough to pull supply wagons over muddy roads. Of course, if you find this mule can pace, so much the better."

So Tim Larkin was again a scout. He had no uniform, no camp duties, and no issue of arms or ammunition; just a recommendation that he keep his own gun handy and shined for use.

The two men left Lyon's headquarters and went out into the dark streets of Boonville. Duffy was so happy he couldn't talk for a while; just hummed off tune to himself until they got back to where Tim had tied his mule.

"Larkin," Duffy said, leaning with one big hand against the bridle rein still on the post. "Can ye see that little mess of stars up there comin' out of them clouds?"

Tim could.

"Well, you won't see them stars in the same place an hour from now or even at this same minute tomorrow night, but wherever they are, they're the same stars." Duffy paused and scratched his chin whiskers. "That's Lyon!"

Ten days later Tim Larkin lay on a little hill under the stars about which Duffy had gone so touched. And now Tim felt he could talk almost as pretty about Duffy, though there was nobody present to hear it except Duffy himself, and he was snoring.

Maybe after another week he would hate the man; that is, if he, Timothy Larkin, were still alive. Hate Duffy for telling Lyon what a sharp person this Larkin was, and how trustworthy.

Tim felt as if a wind were stirring his hair at the back, and there was no wind; besides, he was lying with his head on his saddle.

These last days had been so strange that he actually caught himself wondering if he'd ever had a farm up in Clay County, if he had five children who called him Pa, and a wife who chewed her lips to keep them from trembling when she told him good-by, or a ma who was getting old without actually caring any more.

He was ashamed of his forgetfulness. Ashamed of this new stir of youth and freedom. How long had it been since he'd felt so free? For the life of him he couldn't recall once when he had ridden a mule over the country whooping at rabbits, shooting at buzzards or hawks, and tearing back to camp with Duffy to report what they had found.

And always Duffy was talking or making Tim talk, his blunt features alive to every change of weather, tone, or country. His skin under the July sun had taken on the toughness of Old Man Arnett's leather-working hands.

"You positively got a extra bone in your head that sounds

danger I think," Duffy said after Tim told him about Burgess back in '52. "Now if it wasn't for you seein' that cotton mouth when we was swimmin' I'd be dead by now of p'is'n snake bite."

"Go on! You'd-a seen it before it hit."

"And that's why I told Lyon about you. Larkin, you was just raised up for this special kind of scoutin'." Duffy was serious. "Anybody that can ride a horse can do ordinary scoutin' like we've been doin', but to go into the enemy's camp and become one of 'em—that's different."

There were dozens of scouting parties out before this army, but the very fact that at last the army was moving was exciting. Over two thousand men moving together like some great monster down the road from Boonville to Clinton.

Of course, at the moment in Missouri you couldn't cross a county line without taking notice of the parade grounds, the flags, and many of the Missouri state flags instead of the stars and stripes. Lyon and his officers had a hard time convincing this motley army that it wasn't their duty to pull down and punish as they crossed the country. The officers had to talk and joke with the men and then get serious about the whale of a job that was waiting for them down in the southwest corner of the state to keep Price and Claib Jackson from making connections with the Confederate army in Arkansas.

When Lyon talked, the men listened as if he'd thrown some kind of witching powder in their eyes. He had a special influence over men who had come off to fight because it was too hot at home or because the other fellows in the neighborhood had signed up. He made them feel that they were heroes, defending innocent homes from pillage and disgrace; he made them think their lives were nothing before this need to defend their union that George Washington and Ben Franklin and the rest had formed. He made them see slavery as their calm Missouri existence had never even imagined it.

Lyon made it easier for the officers to enforce a "hands off"

discipline. There were those in the army who came up leading a horse or carrying a bushel of fresh roasting ears, for which the officer in charge knew there had been no exchange of coin, and if Lyon had talked recently enough, it wasn't too difficult to make the soldiers return the property.

Tim was glad he was a scout so he didn't have to march at all hours in the blazing sun, wearing out his boots until he had his feet on the scorched ground, because the army supplies were never quite enough to go around.

This forced marching took all of Lyon's excess energy. He rode his fine horse up and down the lines, encouraging the men, shouting questions to them that made them forget their thirst:

Claiborne Jackson was before them with five thousand men, maybe more, were they going to let him get away into Arkansas? To bring back Confederate soldiers to whip them into secession?

As Tim lay on the hill looking up at the stars, he recalled all this and much more. Below him lay the camp of Sturgis and his Kansas Volunteers. It would be at least two days before Lyon's men would join up with them and go towards Osceola, where already Lyon had sent men to make ready for the crossing of the Osage River. Duffy had said they must take leave of the army and go far into the camp of the Missourians.

Tim didn't know just how much he would like that. If he should meet men that he knew, he must tell them he had come to fight with Price. Duffy could not go along; Lyon needed Duffy.

"They'd be more chance of me bein' found out and hung for a spy," Duffy said. "With you and your way of rememberin' there ain't no more danger than jumpin' a crick and back again."

Suppose he should run across Percy Downing, who would probably be riding one of his fine horses. Percy wouldn't question him. And suppose he should gain information and pass it

back to General Lyon, information that would cause Percy's death and slaughter of his company?

Today Tim had gone up to a little church near Clinton, a church made of fine sawed lumber with a steeple and a bell. He had sat on his mule and looked in the window to see the hand-carved pulpit and polished benches. What kind of a man had given that church for the Lord? And why?

As Tim had looked inside at the fine little church he had felt ashamed that he had not been more generous. If he were going to give a church, why not a good one? He promised again that if he got home safe and his place was unharmed, he'd build a new church—yes, and he'd put one of those fancy pulpits in front.

He wished he knew whether it was a states' man or a Union man who had given this one, and what difference it made to the Lord, and which the Lord would help if it came to a question of Percy Downing or Tim Larkin.

But Duffy was stirring, "Lark, Lark, is it time to be off?"

"I wouldn't think so yet."

"The farther you git by dark the less ridin' in this hot sun."

"How far do you aim to go with me?" Tim felt like a little boy instead of a grown man in his thirties.

"No distance at all, Larkin. You see I got to be gittin' back to tell Lyon about Sturgis. Ain't it a shame we ain't got telegraph connections rigged up some way like they have in the East?"

"Save a lot of saddle leather."

"Well, Larkin, I'll remember you as the Missourian with the blackest beard I ever see," Duffy said. "And I'll remember these days as about as good as I've knowed since the Mexican War."

Tim felt his lightheartedness had been largely due to Duffy's attitude towards war. "I'm mighty glad I met up with you," Tim said. "Last few days I been rememberin' I growed up young and missed a lot of horseplay. Maybe that's why some likes war."

"It ain't like this when it gits to be war," Duffy was serious. "I'm wonderin' what that mob of untrained fellers will do if they actually have to fight in hate. You got to hate a man's guts to draw a gun on him. Now in the Mexican War it was different. Foreigners—skin not even the same color."

Duffy would understand how Tim felt about Percy all right, though there wasn't time to tell. Tim took the hobble off his mule after he'd tightened the saddle girth. "I'm glad I got a good animal under me."

"You may look out of place with Price's men, ridin' on a mule. They tell me his army is mounted on Missouri and Kentucky saddle horses and that on lax days they have horse races and show gaits—regular gentlemen's army."

"I'll soon find out."

Tim was glad for his early start and that Duffy wasn't along, because he was getting into territory where Price had been, and he needed to be ready at any moment to sign up as a State Guard man. At first he didn't know what to tell people, for he wasn't sure of their sympathies. At one house, where he stopped to inquire the way to Governor Jackson's camp, the woman set her dog upon him. At another house the old man invited Tim in to eat dinner.

Tim imagined this old man must have been a lot like Percy's pa. He had a mare and a fine young colt grazing in his door yard. "Seein' you astride a mule almost makes me want to offer you my mare here," the old man said. "I never could abide to ride a mule, and to think one of Price's men ridin' one riles my pride."

"But this is a pacin' mule," Tim said, "easy ridin' as most saddle horses, besides a mare like that is too valuable to the country to risk even for Price."

The old man rose from his chair and shook his fist toward the east. "Missouri would be bootlickin' if Blair and Lyon had

their way, but Price and Jackson will make kindlin' wood of them if they ever meet in battle."

The old man led the way into the kitchen, where two Negro women were serving up food on a drop-leaf table.

"Ever see Price?" The old man's fierce look seemed to force Tim into a chair. "Now there's a general for you!"

And while Tim ate, the old man took scarcely a bite because he wouldn't pause in his talk. Two of his boys had gone fighting in Mexico with Price, and there was so much to tell.

Tim imagined the boys had probably never worked a day on this place. Off to adventure. The fences needed mending, the weeds in the corners were high as a man's head, and the very chair Tim sat upon had a rickety leg.

Tim felt guilty, eating the old man's fried chicken and biscuits with cream gravy, but he did feel he earned the victuals by listening to so much talk. Before he finished he had learned that Jackson was supposed to be just one county south.

Tim's mule was rested, because Tim had stayed until the worst of the heat of the day had passed over. He planned to ride until good dark, tonight, and then tomorrow morning join up with the first horseback riders he saw heading south to Jackson's Camp.

If Tim had obeyed his hunch, he'd have swapped his weary mule for a fresh horse somewhere and ridden on all night, but the thought of floundering through these swollen streams deadened his desire for hurry. He slept badly and felt he'd had no rest. His conscience seemed to ride ahead, prodding him into dreams.

He remembered once as a kid when he'd gone to the creek to help his mother and some other women wash. It was the task of the little boy to keep the fire blazing under the wash kettle. In between times he might try to fish, or wade, or even sail pieces of wood, so long as he did this below where the women were rinsing their clothes. But on this special day he

had disobeyed. He had gone up the stream, and that was how he happened to find the walnut rolling pin wedged in between some rocks.

"Laws what a beauty," his ma had exclaimed.

"But you dassn't keep it, Minerva Larkin," the other woman had said, "I know for a fact it belongs to Old Lady Alnut, who had water from the crick plumb up in her kitchen."

So Tim had been sent to return the rolling pin. It had weighed heavy on his arm, because it was made of walnut and especially strong for rolling pie dough.

He could see Old Lady Alnut yet, standing on the doorstep. "You tell your ma she can keep that rollin' pin if it has struck her fancy. I got a man to make me another one."

Tim knew she meant to be kind, but as a little boy he had felt as if she had struck him across the face with the awful, eternal, shiftlessness of being without a man.

And now here he was away down here in the hills and hollows of Missouri with only one mule for company while his own little Honey Love might be feeling the need for her pa.

At once Tim knew that it had been the companionship of Duffy that had made all of this strange new experience enjoyable. And now God only knew where Duffy was.

"I'll make out to hurry up this scoutin' trip," Tim said to himself, even then not calling it by its right name.

For miles the next morning Tim had been seeing signs that an army had passed here. There were places where the men had stopped to cook their meals, cut down trees to get deadwood out of the tops for fire, scattered refuse, sometimes whole fields of corn stripped of roasting ears. It was strange to see the green corn standing, bare of every nubbin. Tim felt sudden relief that this wasn't his farm, and then the next moment knew he couldn't be positive that his own farm hadn't fared much worse.

There were so many dependent upon his farm now: all his

own and Newby's children, Harmony and her family, with only Drew and Polk to see after things. Maybe Big Duke would help. Of course, there were five of the boys old enough to be of some use, if there were only someone to put them to work.

Tim felt guilty that he had ever come away. He should have taken his chance there on the land.

Maybe that was why he'd been willing to take this big risk Lyon had asked of him, because he thought it might ease his conscience. No, it was because he knew this war wouldn't last long. It couldn't. He felt maybe this was the best way he could help to bring back days of honest work when a man could see what he had done for the coming year.

Just outside Lamar, about two o'clock in the afternoon of the fifth of July he began to get his first real news.

"I tell you you're missin' a good fight. If I'd a-had a horse or anything on four legs except a cow I'd a-follered this army," an old man with a white beard croaked at Tim. "Jackson hadn't more than got started gettin' his men organized when a young buck come runnin' up, his horse in such a lather you'd a-thought it had run through a washtub of lye soapsuds, 'Reinforcements,' he kept shoutin'. It was as much as two minutes before Jackson and his men could make out that there was a Federal general down around Carthage and a battle threatenin'. They went off this mornin' at daybreak, and even my old ears have heard cannon or roar of somethin'."

Tim didn't want to wait to hear more. "Good-by, Grandpap, I can't miss this fight."

It must be Sigel or somebody who had gone straight to Springfield from St. Louis by way of Rolla.

Maybe he should turn and race back for Lyon. And then Tim realized how wild and fear-born that thought was. Lyon with his army was not more than making Clinton, if that far.

The mule must have sensed danger, because he snorted and plunged in pursuit of the missing army. The road was well marked; it looked as if hundreds of horses had trampled

through here, riding far out to the sides and at a speed that threw dirt onto the weeds and saplings.

Now and then Tim saw pieces of discarded equipment, a skillet here, a blanket there; once he even saw a sofa pillow, and another time a good brass-banded water bucket. This would be riches to someone with conveyance and time to pick up the leavings.

From Lamar to Carthage was a considerable distance, with swollen streams to cross, but Tim had gone less than five miles when he realized he was riding over ground where a battle had been fought. In places the trees looked as if a hard hail storm had passed over, in others a tornado; and this strange tremor in the air was from guns in the distance, big guns that shook the earth. There would be firing, then long silences in which Tim could hear, close at hand, birds and chipmunks and horseflies and mosquitoes.

Then Tim saw his first horse dead in battle. It was a beautiful, trim, dappled-gray with black markings, and Tim felt sickened for its owner. What it must have meant to that man to run on afoot and leave that warm, gasping horseflesh. Probably raised it from a colt, had it named and trained to come when called, "Coap, Coap."

God! What will the country come to, wastin' its substance—its honest horseflesh, eatin' its corn while still green in the field, tearin' out gashes in the land where good farms could be! No pride of order, no hope for tomorrow.

"God," Tim said again. He was glad he hadn't let himself get too attached to this mule. He'd fought with himself from the first, never becoming close and attached and acquainted, as he had with Lonesome. And now he knew why. He hadn't even called this mule by the name the boys had given him when he was a stiff-legged little colt and went about sticking his nose into everything. Curiosity; so the boys had called him Cury.

The mule had snorted and reared at sight of the dead horse, but weariness had made him soon grow calm.

How could a battlefield look so deserted? Tim let his mule amble on into the woods. They were out again before he came to the row of three dead men. Not dressed as soldiers, but these three had fought for a cause and had been laid here together, as if when there was more time, for burial. Tim could not let himself look longer at the three men. He remembered Newby. Why hadn't someone put them in the shade? Dead here in the blazing sun. Tim wished he could spare his blanket to cover the three of them, but he knew he'd need that blanket tonight when it turned off cool, though now he almost wished to be without his shirt.

What was his hurry? He didn't want to get to that battle before it was over; he might have to fire his gun at the Federals.

He tied his mule to a scrub oak and started stripping branches from young trees to lay over the faces of the three who were dead. Yes, he knew he'd never do it if someone were watching him; it would look too soft, like some old woman who could cry over every sad story. One of these boys was too young to die. There was scarcely a fuzz on his upper lip, and his teeth were white and too little worn. Tim knew now why he had to do what he was doing. Tearing his hands as he stripped these branches and broke down trailing grapevines, he was easing or maybe substituting another pain: Timmy and Arnett and George and little Stephen A. Douglas Larkin.

When he caught up with Jackson's stragglers it was evening. To the men, he was to be pitied because he hadn't seen Sigel's men forming and marching, always forming and marching in good order, even though it had been smarter to keep to the trees.

The Missourians were happy with their victory, for though they had captured nobody, they had been in pursuit all day.

Tim asked them the name of their regiment. These foot soldiers in homespun clothes and carrying squirrel guns laughed

in his face. "We ain't the reg'lars; we jist fill in when somebody calls for reinforcements."

It was going to be easy to make himself a part of this crowd. Probably nobody would even ask his name, but he'd better tell the truth, just in case he met someone who knew him as from Clay County.

They were hungry and tired and relieved that darkness had put a stop to their pursuit, and proud that they were occupying the very ground that the Union general Sigel and his men had occupied the night before. This army would eat bread made from the flour taken from the Carthage mills the day before. But for this flour Governor Jackson's men would never have known that Sigel was within striking distance.

"You come a long way to join up, brother," one man who looked like a farmer said to Tim. "I was in Clay County onct myself, and it's a long piece. If you've got any grub in your saddle bag, lay it out, and we'll share what we got with you."

So Tim became a part of this shapeless army. Lyon's men had no uniforms, but they camped at night in more or less neat formation. This army of Governor Jackson's looked like a gigantic syrup-cooking bunch; fires scattered all over the place, and men wrapped in blankets in the very paths a person would need to use if there were a sudden alarm.

"It's a mighty good thing it's dark, because if it wasn't we'd have to take to our heels—ever last man of us about out of ammunition," the farmer told Tim as he stirred the fire under his pot of coffee. "I'm sure glad you brought sidemeat from Clay County, or we'd damned near starve tonight."

Tim was slicing his bacon into thick chunks the wrong way of the grain.

"Here, gimme that. A body could tell you was just fresh from wife-cooked victuals and hadn't learned to prepare your own. And boys, I bet he snorts when he first drinks our coffee."

Tim turned his bacon over to the stranger.

"Is your shootin' arm as out of practice?"

Tim had a sudden fear that he might have something about that would give him away; even a smell of barracks on his clothes. He had to answer. "We still got squirrels up in Clay County."

"Wisht you'd brang one along in your jeans."

"Already these men are tired of army grub," the farmer said, "I could do with about a dozen of my old lady's hot biscuits."

"And what else?" a colt of a boy said with smart-aleck tone.

"Dry up, Pud Parsons, before I send you off to headquarters for a pinch of salt and a china teacup."

Tim realized he was so tired and sleepy he could hardly wait to eat, much less make sense out of the talk that flowed over his head. He'd taken the risk of giving a false name. He'd turned Larkin around to make Karlin. If he met Mima's husband he was going to be in a mighty embarrassing position. But he would manage some way to keep away from Cass County soldiers.

Here these men had fought a battle and he had merely ridden his mule some fifty miles, and part of the time in the tracks of the army at war, yet they didn't seem tired. He wondered if any of them around this fire were acquainted with the three men he'd cut branches to shade, or if one of them had lost a good horse. Their talk was light and so easy that you wondered if they cared what became of the country so long as they had their coffee and bacon with bread so hard you had to soak it or break your teeth off at the roots. Tim had already started eating when the farmer took his share and bowed his head over his tin plate to say grace. It wasn't long, but the four other men seemed impatient.

"Now that we got that over," one of the men said, "it will be safe for you to do a little cussin'."

The farmer made no comment but sucked at his mustache after he'd drunk the scalding, strong coffee as if he could not bear to waste a drop.

Now Tim didn't blame the army for going into cornfields and picking the green ears. Three or four days of this and he'd be right in there with the rest, and he'd probably help chase chickens and any young animals that looked as if they weren't too close to their owners. What could an army do if it wasn't supported by the district, unless it had a mighty active quartermaster's supply train?

"You didn't bring along a featherbed, did you?" one of the men asked Tim.

"Wish I had."

"Pud here brought one, but Gov'ner Jackson made him give it up back at Lamar."

"What about your feather pillow?" Pud asked. The firelight made his features look even more youthful.

"Can't we stop talkin' and get a little sleep?" the farmer begged. "This has been a mighty big day for Missouri. Jist imagine these State Guard men makin' that St. Louie Northern army git up and dust out of our way."

Tim bestirred his mind to listen.

"And tomorroy we're aimin' to go to Granby mines and git ammunition."

Here at last Tim felt he had heard something worth coming all these miles to hear.

"That's nothin'. I heard we was meetin' up with Ben McCulloch and Price."

Tim was wide awake. What was the use of dragging an army down here after Governor Jackson if you couldn't keep him from connecting with the Confederate army from Arkansas?

Talk! Tim knew he'd have to learn how to sift what he heard, but right now he felt he'd give fifty acres of good Clay County land for the chance to let all holds go and sleep instead of trying to keep things in reasonable order in his mind.

All at once he began to wonder if these men didn't already know that he was a spy. Suppose they were trying to trap him? Why would men talk so unconcerned after a battle? Why

would they talk of tomorrow instead of what they had done today? It wasn't natural.

"You got a blanket?" one asked Tim.

"Yes."

"Me and Pud don't have none. If Pud could have a piece of your'n, I'd take a share of the farmer's."

"Sure," Tim said, looking at the young Pud, with the soft fuzz on his chin and cheeks, and remembering why his face had looked so familiar: it was about the age of the one he'd shaded with oak branches.

In the night Pud cried out, and when Tim rose on his elbow he heard muffled sobbing.

By morning, when the camp was stirring, Pud was as gay and frisky as a yearling bull. He was first off to the creek for water and back with word that the first ones who got down to headquarters would be used to fill in, so he didn't want any breakfast. He fell to tying his stuff up in a piece of rag carpet.

"You'd better eat, marchin' on an empty belly ain't good soldierin'," the farmer said.

By the early light Tim realized "the farmer" was the oldest in the group, with gray in his dirty brown beard, and wrinkles around his eyes that weren't made by shadows of a campfire. He looked kind, and maybe too tired. Tim remembered that he swore with the same ease that he gave thanks for his meal.

Where was that army of society? Fine horses and playing men? As far as Tim could see, all the men about him were of this same stripe, good honest workers, or kids that should be home minding their pas and learning how to run a farm.

Tim didn't want to make himself conspicuous by refusing to become an actual part of this army, so he started getting his stuff together too. "I'll go with you, Pud. Maybe we can find another outfit that ain't had breakfast."

Pud looked pleased.

Just so they didn't fill up a Cass County gap, Tim thought. As they trudged off for their mounts, Pud said, "You

wouldn't mind if you didn't call me Pud, would you? The fellow with the fierce beard knew me when I was a little kid. My name's Scott Parsons."

"Sure, Scott."

"I'm glad you came with me. Them other fellers don't have horses. I want to go into the cavalry."

"So do I," Tim said with earnestness to match Scott's.

"It's kind of funny me bein' called Scott, ain't it? I guess General Scott maybe sent out them men we fought with yesterday."

"He sure did." Then Tim added, "I reckon," so that he wouldn't sound too positive.

"My pa fit with General Scott in the Mexican War. I was born after he left, so Ma thought he'd like me bein' named for his commander."

"Did he?"

"We never knew."

"Too bad." Tim located his mule. "You the only boy your ma's got?"

"Yes."

"Did you ever think maybe you should-a stayed home with your ma?"

"No. This fight ain't going to last long, and I'd hate to miss out on a good fight in my lifetime. Ma says there's not over one war to a generation."

The boy singled out a scraggly-looking horse with sagging neck.

"I guess if I'd been smart I'd-a managed to steal a better horse than this one off of some of them Union men as I come down, but this Old Bessie has been in the family so long I kind of thought she might feel hurt."

"How old are you, Scott?"

"Goin' on seventeen."

"I'm about twice as old as you," Tim said.

"I'd never-a guessed you was *that* old."

Tim was sorry he had told the boy.

"But you don't look *near* that old. I think we can get into Old B's regiment any way. Tell 'em you're twenty-five. He don't like old men."

"So you know just where we're goin'."

"Sure."

Tim asked cautiously. He didn't have any plans if the answer were affirmative. "Not a Cass County company, is it?"

"No, Henry County."

Tim's relief was almost audible.

Pud led off on an ancient gallop that made Tim feel ashamed he didn't have a better horse to offer such a kid.

They threaded their way through camps, across ditches, and around thickets, until the boy turned to tell Tim to get off.

"I think Old Bessie maybe looks better without me on her. I'll tie the bridle on the saddle horn to make her hold up her head. Old B's kind of tony when it comes to them he takes in his company."

Tim got off too and led his mule. He could see he wasn't going to get into this company with a mule if the commander was so tony.

"Sh!" Scott held up his hand. "They're at mornin' prayers. Old B never neglects religious services after a skirmish."

Tim could see that the group ahead was standing in a close circle as if to hear.

"Come on up. If he thinks we're apt to be devout, he's more apt to take us."

Tim tried to motion to the boy that they should tie their animals to a shrub, but Scott shook his head.

They were close enough now to hear that the men were repeating the Lord's prayer.

It gave Tim a queer feeling in his spine. These were his enemies.

"And," after the close of the prayer a voice intoned, "forgive our enemies, but make them weak in battle. Amen."

The men in the group put on their hats.

"And now, boys," the voice Tim had heard before, "remember when you shoot, aim at the top britches button, for a man hit there has time to make himself right with his Maker."

Tim, by craning his neck, could see who he supposed was "Old B"—a man about fifty, with red whiskers and red-brown eyes who looked to have been chopped from a big block of seasoned oak.

"Them on the outskirts," Old B said in a changed, business-like voice, "can come forward and be swore in—fourteen from my command is dead, wounded, or missin'."

So Tim came forward with Scott and the others around the edge and stood in line.

"Now before we swear you fellows in I want you to know what's required of you," Old B said.

Tim could see Scott biting his lips to keep them from trembling.

"We're goin' to fight for the State of Missouri," one of the new men shouted.

Old B held up his hand. It was a square-made hand with heavy knuckles. "No talkin' please. What I say, you do without askin' questions, also what them that I put over you says is also law, and I expect you to keep fightin' as long as your guts and ammunition holds out." He turned to his orderly. "How many men is offerin' themselves?"

"Twenty-seven, sir."

"Pick out the fourteen best mounted and youngest—but no babies."

Tim thought that left both Scott and himself out. He was beginning to feel a sudden relief, when the orderly whacked him on the shoulder with a "ten" and gave Scott a whack with "eleven."

"Jumpin' Jupiter, I was scared," Scott said as they fell into line, "I just knowed he'd pass me up. But I drewed down my frown wrinkles and pulled in my mouth to look old."

At last Tim was traveling with an army as a soldier and not a scout. He tried to keep his mule in line with Scott's worn horse and to act as if he were happy to become a regular after all these days on the fringes of the army.

"Goll," Scott said, "this is the third time I tried to git into a bunch of reg'lars. It shore is a relief to be up where things are happenin' instead of back where you begin to feel like you're no better than horse droppin's."

"It shore is." But Tim was beginning to wonder how he would find out what he needed to know, caught in here between mounted rows of men. Suppose they were to stumble on Sigel's men again, and there'd be a battle; suppose he couldn't manage to get away when he did find some important information. Suppose Old B would guess that he wasn't all he seemed.

"Anybody know where we're headin'," Scott turned in his saddle to ask the two behind.

"South."

Scott turned red, but held his ground. "I may not be old enough to grow a mattress on my chin, but I do know my directions."

Then the shoe was on the other foot.

"We're headin' to Granby, youngster," another of the men said.

"Didn't I tell you?" Scott was elated. "How much you wanna bet we team up with McCulloch and Price?"

"Git dry behind the ears," someone just back of Tim said. "We been expectin' McCulloch and Price since we crossed the Osage or was it the Grand or even the Missouri?"

But again the kid had the laugh on the wise old one, for once on the other side of Granby the men were told to line up and be at ease. Tim sat on his boys' mule, Cury, and watched Ben McCulloch and Sterling Price and Governor Jackson review the troops.

So what was the need of Lyon rushing his men South to head

off Jackson when he'd already made a junction with the army from Arkansas, under McCulloch and Jefferson Davis?

They were splendid in uniforms with brass buttons and gold braid, and in spite of himself Tim shouted with the rest at sight of them marching up.

"And our *officers* ain't even got uniforms," Scott said, "Just pieces of flannel sewed on their coats to show their rank."

Tim hoped grudgingly that all confederate armies weren't as splendid as this guard of McCulloch's. And he wished somehow that the great rough man in the yellow duster who sat his horse with ease yet the bearing of a king hadn't felt it his duty to follow Governor Jackson out of the Union. Sterling Price would be a hero in any man's war or on any man's horse.

"Goll, if them Unionists could just see these three they'd give up," Scott said with tears in his eyes. "Lyon can't stand up against them, the little Connecticut bastard."

It was Price who rode forward to talk to the men. His voice boomed out. He told them he wanted them to know how proud he was of them for their heroic behavior yesterday. Green troops acting like veterans. He wanted them to know that he would stand by them and with them throughout this fighting, and what he couldn't do for them, General McCulloch would do.

Tim thought he saw contempt on the Southern general's face. He looked too conscious of this dusty, bedraggled horde of Missourians. Tim was sorry for his state. Ashamed that such splendor could come from Arkansas to show them up for their poverty.

It was the way he'd felt when he used to go to Arnett's barefooted and met Polly's older brothers stomping out in riding boots to get on their horses. It was that which made him resolve he had to be a rich man some day, so his young ones wouldn't ever have to feel this mean poverty.

"I'll bet for all his buttons he can't shoot or ride better than Price," Scott said, so that Tim knew he was feeling the same kind of bitter taste in his mouth.

"We're not well armed yet," Governor Jackson was saying now, "but within a month we'll be better armed than those we fought yesterday."

And then he told of the one hundred fifty stands of arms and seven wagons that were captured at Neosho yesterday by the Missourians, and the finest part of which was the fact that these trophies would be patterns for the making of arms. A certain Thomas H. Price knew how to do it.

The men cheered until they were hoarse. Victory was theirs. Within a couple or three weeks they would have Springfield and be on their way unmolested to the state Capital, and then the Northern usurpers would be thrown out, so that Missouri could once again be a free state and people could sit down under their own vine and fig tree and fear that no man would disturb their peace.

Price and Jackson used different methods from Lyon, but Tim could see that they got the same results.

"But you ain't supposed to go off without leave," Scott begged. "I knowed when you snuck out from under that blanket that you was goin' to try to do somethin' of the kind."

"Sh," Tim put his hand over Scott's mouth. "I tell you I got a woman back there at Granby that I promised I'd see. If we head on south I'm apt not to see her fer a month. You ain't old enough to know how mad a woman can git if she thinks you've neglected her."

Tim was making up as he went along and was mighty proud of himself. "I sent her word two, three week ago that if I ever got down this far I'd come past. Well, you know yourself, Pud."

"Scott," the boy corrected.

"You know y'self, Scott, that if we ever git down here south and that whole army goes back and forth to Granby for lead for ammunition that this woman is goin' to have enough men around that she won't have to save time to talk to me; besides, I need a drink."

"You sure don't have to go clear to Granby for that."

Tim heard a stir behind him. If he didn't get away tonight he didn't know when he could make it, and the information he'd collected was too important to wait.

"But yore mule can't go clear back to Granby—that's fifteen mile, and back here before daylight to save you."

"Sure, that mule's tough, but he can't do it if you keep hangin' onto me like a turtle before thunder." Tim was beginning to sweat under the collar.

"But I feel kind of responsible for you," Scott said stubbornly.

There was a new moon just going down that looked like a slice of maiden blush apple in the sky, and against it Tim could see Scott's chin.

"They can't do any more than make me carry slops for a month," Tim said.

Poor Scott was going to have to take it. Tim threw his left arm around the boy's shoulder (too narrow and frail) and acted as if he were going to scratch his own neck with his right hand. It was a good clean blow on that smooth, childish chin.

"You poor little fool," Tim said to himself. "You've still got my blanket."

As he rode from the edge of the camp he was grateful the guards were asleep—or off duty. He kept saying to himself, "I didn't hit him too hard. I was careful about that. He'll come to in a few minutes."

If he just wouldn't have the sense to suspect that this going off had nothing to do with a woman or a drink in Granby!

Tim wished he had some kind of map about him. Even sewed inside his coat or in his shoe sole or somewhere. To just head off north bearing a little east according to the maps he'd memorized was going to be harder than he'd imagined.

From July eighth to July eleventh were the most memorable days of Tim's life for unrelenting, broiling sunshine. Back in Clay County Tim could remember a day or two of such heat,

but not three of them; and in Clay County he always knew where he was going and exactly how to find anybody that he especially wanted to see. But in this whole vast section of country he had no faint idea where he could find Lyon and his army.

At first it had seemed that an army composed of maybe five thousand men ought to be easy to locate. As if you could put your ear to the ground and get the vibration of their marching feet, or put your nose in the air and somehow scent the heat of their bodies on a sudden sharp breeze. Tim found that the distance he'd covered in three days had been nothing to the distance required of him now, and time was important. Lyon needed to get here before the Missourians got their ammunition trains filled, before they got organized and trained, and yet he needed to know that McCulloch was already with Price and Jackson and that there was no point in marching the starch out of the Union soldiers to try to cut off the junction that had already been made.

Surely Lyon had sent out other men besides himself to get this information. As a matter of pride Tim wanted to get to camp first. However, after the third day of having to stop to rest his thumping mule every mile or so, he began to pray that he'd get there at all. What good could he do banging around here through the fields and lanes when time was like a weight about his mule's neck, growing heavier, as if each hour wasted added another lug of weight.

The moon was on the increase, so the ninth and tenth Tim rode as far by night as he could see, resting through the sweltering afternoons. On the night of the eleventh Tim didn't stop until he could go absolutely no farther without danger of falling off his mule. He made no effort to hobble the worn animal; just left a long halter and bedded himself down on the bare ground with his head on the saddle. It felt good to be cold, and he hoped Pud Parsons was enjoying that blanket.

Tim had no idea how long he had been asleep when he be-

gan to dream that he was sitting on the floor beside his mother's loom and she was weaving. She sang as she worked the treadles and kept time with her shuttle. The treadles needed new bacon rinds on their joints, because they were squeaking and creaking, but most of all the vibration seemed to tickle Tim's spine. He laughed out as he had done as a child, and this laugh awakened him.

He sat up.

The night was as strange as if there were a million insects humming somewhere in the distance or as if the very stars themselves were treading dust. Tim seemed refreshed, as if he'd had a long rest. It must have been the dream about his mother. And then he shook his head and pressed his hands over his ears to release the air that seemed to be roaring. The strangest part was that he still seemed to feel the vibration of the clacking loom and hear the screeching of the ungreased joints.

And then as if the mule, poor dumb animal that he was, had better sense than Tim, that creature flung up his head and let out a bray that would blast eardrums for a mile around.

"Cury!" Tim was on his feet grabbing his saddle in the darkness and feeling his way toward the awful noise. "It's the army!"

In all this starlit blackness Tim seemed for the moment to be given the eyes of an owl. He stepped aside to avoid shrubs and trees and went straight for the mule, which stood without moving, as if intent upon being helpful.

"Cury, I got to depend on you. On your animal nose that's sharper than mine, and on the good God." Tim felt sobs in his throat. This army must be pressing on through darkness because of the need to hurry. Long, weary marches, and some men without shoes because he, Tim, hadn't been able to find them sooner.

For once Tim did not worry. He simply gave this mule his head and ducked to keep from having his eyes put out by switching branches that made the starlight seem to flicker on the purple black of the sky.

Soon Tim could tell they were very close to this army, more by intuition than by actual sensory knowledge, and then the whole sound and rhythm ceased. Tim may not have realized this at once, for he was so intent upon staying with the eager mule, but when Cury stopped and brayed like an animal in torment, Tim knew, when the sound had died away and his ears were back to normal hearing, that there was a silence equal to that in the bottom of a well when you're waiting for the man at the top to dump the basket.

As if an echo coming back from his mule's raucous bray, and multiplied by the hills, Tim heard the dozen brays.

He threw his arms about Cury's neck and swore as he hadn't sworn since the boys were big enough to repeat what he said. It was a kind of chanting blasphemous praise to the gumption of mules as a whole, and to the Lord for giving him, Tim Larkin, sense enough to ride one.

The chant would soon be against the same animal for his neck-cracking rush through the timber to the sound of many mules. Cury paused only now and then to give an especially loud welcoming bray, as if he recognized those mules as the ones with which he had been stabled for ten days in Boonville.

Tim came into an opening where he could look out and down, and there he saw a congregation of lightning bugs, or as if some of the stars in the milky way were reflected in a still stream that cut through the valley.

An army at night. Thank God.

By the light of the candle Nathaniel Lyon looked ten years older than Tim remembered him at Boonville. He must have walked half of this awful distance with the men, for his boots were dust-caked and his usual neatness looked tainted by contact with so many.

"You're sure," General Lyon kept saying. His startling eyes were as intent as ever, like some camp-meeting preacher's just before the final verse of the invitation hymn.

"Sure, sir," Tim said. He had finished with his report. It had been strange to him that he would feel no shyness before the great Lyon, that he could talk fast and make those who listened understand. Before this, Tim had felt he would probably tell his story to Duffy and Duffy would put it before the great general.

"When did you last eat, Larkin?" the general asked.

"I don't remember." Tim felt his shirt against his skin, and was ashamed that he hadn't taken it off and washed it tonight before he fell asleep.

"Bring us some food, orderly," the general commanded, "I haven't eaten today either."

Tim wondered how he could have minded the heat, the worry, the danger when he had such a commander.

To another orderly Lyon directed that word be sent up and down the line that the final thirty miles into Springfield would be made in regular time—not forced marches.

"You Missourians, Larkin, are superb." Lyon seemed revived. "Since three o'clock yesterday morning they have marched fifty miles. No telling how far you have ridden in three days."

"Just far enough to make connections," Tim said. "And you got my mule to thank for that."

Lyon laughed. It was a hearty quick sound that said more to Tim than a thousand words.

"See that this man's extremely intelligent mule is well rewarded."

PART VII

July 1861

TIM WAS ONE OF THE FEW scouts who saw Lyon ride into Springfield on July 13.

The general had left the army camped about ten miles outside and had come riding on his fine iron-gray horse, accompanied by the ten huge, bearded Germans from St. Louis who composed his guard and rode horses just a shade less fine than the one ridden by General Lyon himself. This guard dwarfed their leader, and Tim wondered if someone hadn't chosen these very men for contrast more than for protection, though they were certainly well enough armed.

The moment of triumph was short, for once settled in Springfield the commander discovered there were no supplies waiting for his exhausted men, no food, no shoes, and no paymaster. Worse than all the rest, many of the men had signed up for only three months, and because of their disgust they could not be persuaded to re-enlist, even by their leader.

They had joined the army to fight, not march all over the

state doing monkey business. What was more, their families needed them at home. Like many volunteers, they had thought the task would be short and brilliant instead of interminable and dull.

Tim didn't blame them. He wished there were a good farmer at the head of that business in St. Louis. Any farmer would know you couldn't ask a bunch of neighbors in to help with haying unless you had plenty of victuals on hand, cooked up in prime good taste, and your tools all laid out and sharpened. But here the government expected men not only to work free but barefooted and lank-stomached, and the whole matter of this getting ahead of these Missourians under Price and Jackson depended upon speed. Speed so beforehand that they wouldn't get to train their men or even get their ammunition ready.

And here in the midst of all this confusion and disorder Duffy came in from south of Springfield to report a recruiting station down at Forsythe that needed breaking up. To be frank, the men were simply spoiling for a fight, and those who couldn't go were disappointed.

Duffy took Tim aside to tell him what he'd planned for the next week. Duffy looked crafty-wise in a country straw hat he'd picked up down in the hills somewhere, and entirely different with no chin whiskers; just a little indication of frizzled sideburns.

"I just enlisted in the army of the Missourians," he said.

"Where do you go?"

"To Price. The officers ain't tellin' more than that. I got a leave for two days to go home and tell my old woman where I was goin'."

Tim laughed.

"They'd believe anything, these Missouri recruitin' officers."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, jist imagine takin' two days to go tell the old woman good-by! Say, you wouldn't want to shave off that beard and come with me, would you?"

Tim didn't think he would. He felt he should stay around here so he wouldn't miss the fight. At that time, Tim thought it would be soon.

"Besides, two fellers together is easier suspicioned."

"Where I'm goin' there ain't goin' to be no chance of suspectin' me." Duffy bit off a chew of tobacco and gave it a right good work over before he continued. "I decided I ain't goin' to fool with little fish this time. I'm goin' to git into General Price's staff. Price won't remember me, but I aim to tell him I fought with him in Texas and that I ain't amind to turn ag'in' the South. If nothin' else, I'll do somethin' and git put on the clean-up squad, and then I'll manage to clean Price's quarters. Listen, I'll be so neat there won't be no firin' me."

"I onct told a barefaced boy that I'd probably not git more than a few days of pourin' up slops for goin' off in the middle of the night," Tim said, "name of Pud Parsons—wanted to be called Scott."

"I'll see if I can find 'im."

"Hope you make out as safe as I did," Tim told Duffy as they shook hands. "If you hear shots some mornin' early you know that bunch up at St. Louie has come through with supplies and we're movin' in on you."

"Sure. But you don't know war the way I do, Larkin," Duffy said. "War's as much waitin' as fightin', and about six times as much marchin', and onct you've been in a good fight you'd just as soon fights would come even seldomer."

Duffy banged Tim on the shoulder. "If you'd just-a been a St. Louie butcher you'd probably a been one of them ten men in Lyon's bodyguard with all that beard."

"That's an idea, in case scoutin' falls off."

But Tim with all his humor and in his wildest imaginings could never have guessed what he would be doing for the next ten days. It was as if somebody had picked from his mind

his comparison of farming to well-organized armies and suddenly decided to make him prove his point.

Tim was sent with over a hundred other men out to Greenville in Dade County with Captain Clark Wright and his Home Guards to harvest the wheat. Tim was given charge of finding quarters for the men and seeing that the farmers were pleased with the government checks and the soldiers who did the work. If there weren't enough sacks for the flour, Tim had to see to buying domestic and getting farmers' wives to sew up sacks. If the tools weren't in good shape, Tim made contacts with blacksmiths or simply hunted a grindstone.

"And to think I got a farm up in Clay County where my own grain is probably droppin' out in the ground for want of harvestin'," Tim told one of the men.

"Me too, in Henry County."

"If I was runnin' this army it would be a heap different," still another said.

"But we'll anyhow have fresh flour for our bread," Tim said, sorry now that he'd set the tone for grumbling, "and bread, boys, that's what we eat aplenty of."

"After all it would be mighty wasteful to haul this in from outside when we ain't doin' nothin' but settin' through our britches in them everlastin' camps."

"I done sent word to my old woman that she'd better be makin' me a fresh pair of jeans or I'm apt to have to come home in a rum barrel."

Tim liked the men. Their talk was familiar to him. He was sorry he had been so disgusted when he had to leave Springfield. Surely, by the time they finished the grain in this county, Lyon and the men responsible for reinforcing him would realize that this war was more than ever like a farm. You cut the grain when it was ripe, not after all the heads had bent over and dropped their grain. All right, why not fight when everything was ready instead of waiting to get some kind of fancy tools.

Tim had not blamed Lyon altogether, but he felt if Lyon had been a little tougher in his reports to headquarters things might have moved faster. That is, until Tim went back to Springfield on the twenty-eighth of July with wheat beards still in his pockets and answered a summons to Lyon's headquarters.

Surely, now, something was going to happen.

"Did you ever go to St. Louis, Larkin?" the general asked Tim.

"Yes, sir, several times with stock for the market."

"Do you think you could find your way about enough to reach headquarters and tell General Frémont just what you saw of the Missourians' army?"

"Yes, sir," Tim said it mechanically. He wondered if this could be the wonderful Frémont who had done such wonderful trail-blazing in the West.

"You see, Larkin, something has to be done! I can't seem to get results. While you were out in Dade County harvesting, I even had an order from General Scott for some men. Men!" the general bounced from his chair and started pacing up and down the narrow room, his sandy beard and hair on end. "Why can't they see that the real army of Missouri is down here in the southwest, not split into a dozen guerrilla bands throughout the state? If we don't fight these States Right men down here and beat them, we may as well give up the west to the Confederacy and that, Larkin, is what I'm here *not* to do."

He spun on his heel and thumped the desk.

"If I had ten thousand men I could do it. Ten thousand or even seven thousand, well fed, well clothed, and with arms and ammunition, we could make chaff of the Missourians to scatter to the four winds—their homes." The general's voice dropped to an almost confidential tone. "They aren't slave holders, they aren't even interested in the vile system of slavery, they are only following a hero whom they have learned to trust: Sterling Price. The Battle of Bull Run has given the rebels hope, emboldened them beyond endurance."

He sat down behind his table. "I'm not going to try to write it out for you. I shall depend upon your telling General Frémont of our need. Tell him I have companies ready to be mustered out in less than a fortnight, tell him of the men without shoes and practically losing their clothes from wear."

Tim could see the demand for his most persuasive talk in the eyes of his general. "When do I start, and how?"

"You will be supplied with a horse at sunrise tomorrow. Ride to Rolla; take the train from there."

Duffy would have been shocked to see Tim riding off into the east on one of the fine horses used in Lyon's guard. Tim was surprised himself when he saw the handsome horse he was to have as his own for the next few days.

It was one hundred fifteen miles to Rolla. Tim made the distance in two days.

On the third day of August 1861 Timothy Larkin sat in the outer office of the great stone house for which the United States government paid the fabulous rent of six thousand dollars a year that General Frémont might have a decent headquarters for his Western Division.

Tim had hurried almost every minute since General Lyon had talked to him, that he might come here and tell General Frémont the exact need of Lyon's army, yet here he sat in a crowded room and twirled his hat.

It wasn't the wide felt hat he wore summer and winter, and that he had worn the morning after Newby was found murdered. General Lyon had seen to it that Tim was dressed out like a soldier, though the clothes were definitely borrowed. When Tim tried them on he felt splendidly dressed, almost ashamed of anything so fine, but not here in General Frémont's office, where the uniforms glistened with braid and medals and clanked with gold-handled swords as the foreign-looking wearers clicked heels to attention.

Even the foreign accents of the attendants did not intimidate Tim Larkin. He hadn't yet stopped to think that there might be a reason to hesitate before the great Frémont. As the hours passed into an entire day and Tim's name had not been called for an interview, Tim began to be worried.

Surely the general couldn't understand the urgency of his demand. People had crowded in and out of the office all day, and Tim went without his dinner to keep from losing what he thought might be his turn. Now he almost wished for some of Duffy's plug tobacco to chew on to keep from feeling so lean.

And then the attendant with the most gold braid came to the door, clicked his heels, and said (with a tongue so thick that if Tim hadn't seen the man almost every minute in the last three hours he'd have vowed he was drunk), "Ghentelmen, the Chen-eral iss retiring for the day, vill you rreturn domorrow."

Tim rose, "But I can't wait. It is not for me. I'm not sellin' a thing. I am from General Lyon. I have to leave in the mornin'."

Tim did not notice the shocked surprise on the faces of the others who had waited.

"You will come back domorrow."

Tim thought once of punching the fellow's nose, but saw in time that he was gripping his sword. After all there was nothing gained by being pinned to a wall with a foreign blade, so Tim went out with the others.

"Tomorrow I go early," Tim told himself.

Here he'd been away from Springfield five days. One more day and it would be exactly a month since that battle of Carthage, and if Sigel's men had only known, they could have routed the Missourians then. Now within a month the Missourians could have grown from a wild, untrained, unarmed mob to a force to be feared, armed with plenty of ammunition, cast in their own molds.

It was like going to the market to buy some young cattle to eat your corn to grow big in your profit and coming home with

a bunch of already-fattened stock. No farmer would be so ignorant! And yet generals sat by and waited for stock to fatten before they bought them at unreasonable prices.

Tim strode through the streets of St. Louis for an hour before he remembered he hadn't had a bite of food since breakfast.

Tim stopped at the first hotel in sight to get his supper. He sat at a table close to three men and listened to them talk with shameless attention. They did not like Frémont, personally, but they must sell their blankets before another day or their competitor would be up from Cairo on the river boat.

All at once Tim was not hungry. He thought of those men marching twenty-one miles on a broiling July day, stopping at three in the afternoon to cook their scant food, and going on twenty-nine more miles before they stopped. Sweat, dust, thirst, cracked lips, broken shoes.

"God!" Tim said aloud and pushed his plate away from him. "And there breathe men who'd try to make money out of their hides."

"What did you say?" One of the men turned to Tim, who by then was pushing his chair back with a rasping screech.

"They'd better be good." Tim Larkin towered over the three men. His long legs in the borrowed trousers, his great hunched shoulders in a borrowed coat that wrinkled across his chest when he leaned towards them, his black beard and hair seeming to come alive with belligerence.

"What, my good man?" the smoothest of the three, a wizened little man with a black mustache over bought teeth asked.

"Them blankets, they'd better be *good*." Tim thumped the table. "Or I hope all three of you die slow in the sun and no soul so much as shades your eyeballs from the heat."

Tim saw that one of the men was making quick signs to a waiter. This would be a fine how-de-do if he'd get himself thrown in jail for insulting people in a public place. He wheeled in his tracks and headed for the cashier to pay for his meal.

Tomorrow he'd tell General Frémont. Tell him not only of Lyon but of the blankets.

But there was hardly time to tell about the need for men, much less think of winter supplies.

The handsome Frémont sat at his desk and fingered telegrams and looked at maps while Tim talked.

It was like talking to somebody blind; Tim found himself continually raising his voice.

"There is no use to get so excited," General Frémont looked up from his maps and smiled patiently at Tim.

"Excited!" Timothy Larkin had been a farmer, a miner, a farmer again where he took orders from nobody. After all, he had been a soldier less than two months, and even then a scout and not under strict discipline. "I wish to God I could *git* you excited."

And then quicker than a breath he remembered his mother's old saying that you could catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

"After all, sir, you're the only one who can save us! We got an army before us, mighty near in our pockets, and you, the general of the territory of the West, can either save us and bring honor to your command or waste us and lose the whole State of Missouri to the secessionists. Price is strong and Ben McCulloch is comin' up from Arkansas in numbers that don't bear countin'."

Tim stood breathless. He'd risked everything. Suppose the man sent him away and blamed General Lyon for his lack of respect.

"Today," General Frémont said, shifting a pin in a map before him, "I shall send word for a regiment to come to you from Leavenworth and another from Boonville, and shall send word to General Lyon in accordance."

"Ain't there nothin' closer?" Tim couldn't be satisfied.

"I'm afraid not. Just this morning I received a return on a

shipment of equipment to Springfield. If you stay around here talking, Larkin, it will probably get there before you do." Frémont looked up again; his large expressive eyes were martyred in their weariness. "Good day, Larkin."

Tim wondered as he left why he hadn't poked the noses of those three in the hotel dining room.

When he reached Rolla he found that the horse he had ridden from Springfield had been requisitioned by one of the commanders in Rolla. How could he hope to get out there, one hundred and fifteen miles? If he were a soldier, taking forced marches, he'd expect to do it in three days; that would get him there the night of the ninth or the morning of the tenth. If he only had his mule! Why had he ridden a horse that wasn't his own? He thought of the good horseflesh he'd left at his farm and wondered if Polly had followed his instructions about buying the pony for Honey Love—no, she wanted to be called, what was it now? Anne; and her little hands were fine-boned and warm as they held his there in the orchard, "Arnett says you think I'm always right."

"Your old pap don't think he's always right," Tim said.

At once he knew what he should do. He should go to the captain of the company located in Rolla and explain about his need for a horse as well as his need for hurry.

"Your horse will be back tonight," the captain's orderly explained.

It seemed the captain's horse had thrown his shoe and the captain had been ordered to Ironton to confer with officers there.

"More of Frémont's wrongheadedness," Tim thought, but decided to cool his heels there in Rolla that night and start early the next day.

If the horse had not been dog-tired, Tim might have started out that night, but once on the road he realized his horse must

have been used hard every day while he was in Rolla. Tim found him in such poor condition that he had to stop three or four times in the morning to rest.

To Tim each minute seemed as long as five because he was so anxious to see and talk to General Lyon, to tell him there would be two companies in Springfield in two more weeks. But what if Lyon had grown tired of waiting, or Price and McCulloch had grown so strong that they marched on Springfield?

The first day Tim covered only twenty-five miles.

The second day he started earlier, rode later, for there was again a new moon in the sky—almost exactly as it had been the night he bashed poor Pud's chin because he wanted to be helpful. Poor Pud. But Pud had a good homespun blanket, which was more than Tim could say for himself; this army blanket was sleazy and short.

Why hadn't he bashed the noses of those three smart alecks in the hotel that night? One of them looked like someone he'd seen one time. The littlest one who did the talking. He chattered through his store teeth.

Tim slept badly and rose early, but ride as he would he couldn't make it into Springfield the night of the ninth. It would be real cruelty to this fine horse to make him go on, and yet Tim felt he should not stop. He wasn't tired himself. He could easily walk the ten miles into Springfield. But what would he do with the horse?

Lyon had waited this long, a few hours more surely wouldn't matter. But all night Tim worried in his sleep. He wasn't sure it was Duffy or Newby or young Arnett who kept going through his dreams; it might even have been Pud; and once he knew he dreamed of Burgess, who had a pair of new false teeth that chattered when he talked.

In the morning he didn't stop to get breakfast. He knew he could eat when he got to camp, as he had done the time he came from Carthage and saw the whole line of soldiers like a stream of water bending through the land.

The town of Springfield was crowded with Unionists who had run to the shadow of the army. Every house was filled and bulging with refugees who had tried to bring with them as much as they could carry; the yards looked like Clay County yards on a sale day, when things had been moved into the open for better show.

Spinning wheels, featherbeds tied in pieced quilts, soap kettles, chests of drawers, homemade boxes with leather-hinged lids, mirrors, clocks, precious beyond words to the owners, but looking like junk to Tim as he hurried through the streets a little after six o'clock, the morning of August tenth.

There was the smell of fires burning, of food cooking, of too many people crowded together. The latter smell made Tim glad his family didn't have to be herded around in such disorder. The very sight of so many people in one place would kill Polly's soul. Polly didn't even like picnics where people packed their bedding and food in the back of a wagon and went fishing in a body.

This was just the kind of crowd Lovie would like. She could visit from house to house without having so far to walk.

Tim wondered what made him think of Lovie. He should be thinking how he was going to get into quick talk all that he needed to tell Lyon.

He had started organizing his thoughts when he came to the south edge of the town, from which he could look off into the army camp. At first he couldn't think what was wrong with the sight, and then he whipped up his horse.

There was only one column of smoke, far off to the right. There wasn't a horse or a soldier in view except down there near that lonesome smoke.

Gone! The army had all gone but this little handful. And Tim knew Lyon would be at the head of the ones who were not here.

He thundered along the road. The big horse that had been too tired seemed at last to come alive for him.

Probably fighting right now, and Lyon had gone out after *them*, for his camp was still here.

But how did he know? This might be a bunch of rebels holding the camp. Lyon's men might be scattered over the hills. He'd be held as a prisoner if he went down to make himself known.

Tim drew in his horse. He wasn't even armed sufficiently—six cartridges and an army revolver that had gone with the saddle and horse. He looked quickly to his gun and took thought. In the silence around him after the beating of his horse's hoofs, Tim heard again the sound that had roared in his ears at Lamar: distant guns, big and small, with a tremor as if the air were beaten by a thousand wings. He'd known the sound when geese flew close over his head as they rose from a marsh.

He'd have to find someone who knew which way this army had gone. There were so many more foot soldiers than cavalry that he would have a different kind of trail to follow.

Certainly they wouldn't have gone out through the woods at the back. The Cassville road, but that was too open for an army to take in broad daylight. He'd have to risk riding on down to the camp to see where they had gone. If he saw they were rebels, he might again make them think he was one. Then he remembered this borrowed uniform he wore, and knew he wouldn't dare disgrace it.

He whipped his horse with the reins and swooped down to the camp. Unionists! Thank God.

"Where's the army?"

"Who are you?"

"Scout Larkin with word from General Frémont for General Lyon."

"He's already had word that whatever he does he is on his own responsibility," a soldier in homespun pants and a new pair of army shoes told him, "and he's doin' it."

Tim thought irrelevently that the supply train must have come.

"What?"

"Shootin' hell out of the rebels, cain't you hear?"

"Thanks," Tim said impatiently, "but how do I get there?"

"I ain't certain, but go down the Cassville road and you can see if they turned off to Little York or not. Left here last night after moonset."

If he had forced his horse ahead last night he could have reached here in time to go with the men.

"Got any extry ammunition for this shootin' iron?" Tim waved his gun.

"Sure."

Tim rode off with a gun he had never fired and his pockets full of ammunition that he hoped would fit. He wished he had his mule and his own rifle. It took longer to load that rifle of his, but he was mighty sure of his aim.

The big bay horse plunged away down the road as if he had never been tired.

A soldier shouldn't be a farmer with such respect for horse-flesh—take last night for example. This horse might get shot out from under me, first sight of the army, and after bein' saved last night so's he'd not get winded or beat out.

At the Little York Road, Tim could see where a part of the army had turned off, and without hesitation took the turn for himself. The Cassville road would probably be guarded like a mint.

The trees and underbrush were thicker here. By the time Tim reached the place where he knew the men must have slept on their guns, he could smell the battle as well as hear it. Still he could get no least glimpse of men in action. As that other day, there were long moments of silence, as if the fighters had thrown up a white flag while all of them reloaded. It made Tim want to hold his breath, to shout to break the stillness, and then when the noise came again it would be louder, for he was closer.

"I don't have to go on into this," Tim told himself. "I'm a scout, a spy."

But he kept right on urging the horse ahead. "I ain't a dod-ratted hero either, just spoilin' to fight. I got young uns and a woman waitin' for me, and a farm paid for and improved."

He seemed to be talking to the rhythm of his horse's gallop, "God Almighty, I ain't even lost anything down there, but I damn near got to find Lyon and give him General Frémont's message. I got to do that."

And then he saw a man running toward him. Tim drew his gun. "Quick," Tim ordered, "Missourian or Unionist?"

But the fellow's eyes were glazed by fear or shock, and he didn't even see Tim or hear him shout. Tim looked down at the man's feet and saw new army shoes, so let him pass.

Tim wondered if he shouldn't tie his horse back here and go on afoot. If the fighting was so close, a horse would be in the way, and yet he might be wanted for the cavalry, as poor young Pud Parsons had said. Why poor Pud, Lord only knows but Pud's side might be winning.

Tim wondered how he'd feel if he'd have to shoot the farmer with the dirty beard who looked too tired, or Pud, who was named for General Scott. Tim dare not think of that. He was where he could see men running, puffs of smoke from scattered skirmishers, but most of all the cloud that hung over the hill ahead. It looked like some kind of dream, these people running about. How could they tell their friends from their enemies? Almost no uniforms.

To his left he could see the wagons drawn up to carry off the wounded, and he could see the workers bringing in stretchers. What in God's name would make a fellow want to go bashing on down there into that mess?

Timothy Taylor Larkin didn't have the will in his arms to turn his horse back. His knees pressed his saddle and his heels prodded the side of his hesitant steed. To the right were horse-

men realigning themselves. Tim became a part of this charge and realized he was with the Home Guards with whom he had brought in the wheat back in Dade County. Lucky, he thought, to find a cavalry this easy; there were so few mounted soldiers in all this army.

They hadn't gone twenty paces before they were halted by word from the front, and Captain Wright sent Tim to find Plummer's battalion across the creek. Tim wanted to argue that he'd only just got there, but he turned his horse to cross the creek. When he got closer he realized he'd get enough fighting here, and not from a horse. Men were fighting through a cornfield and along a rail fence, and Tim became a part of this melee.

There was nothing dreamlike about the next hour. Tim fired a gun with which he was unfamiliar. Once he knew it saved his life, for he saw a man behind the fence fall before his gun went off less than six feet from Tim's head.

Most of the time he was just shooting, crawling on his belly like a fishing worm, down corn rows slow and careful. There wasn't time to take aim, and he was too pressed from ahead.

When he heard the command to fall back he found he couldn't move his legs. For one staggering moment he thought he'd been paralyzed, until he realized that someone had fallen across his hips and had pinned him to the earth.

Tim threw the poor dead fellow off and ran with the rest, crouching low so that the corn hid him and the sharp blades didn't cut his face, turning now and then to be sure there wasn't a Reb in the corn row with him, aiming to take him from the rear.

He couldn't find his horse, and anyway he realized he'd been driven across the creek again, and according to the talk they were in Lyon's ranks. A body must be charmed some way not to get hit somewhere with all this shooting—batteries pounding both lines.

Tim wished he could see General Lyon. Just to see what he'd

look like in a fight; he bet he'd not be back somewhere surrounded by his men to be safe. Tim didn't know how he could have taken time to think. His eyes were burning from the powder, his right hand was blistered, and some place he'd caught his sleeve and torn it almost from his shirt. He realized he'd lost that borrowed coat now as well as the horse. This must be war all right when a man could do all this without being conscious until the lulls came. Then he could hear a soldier on the other side of the brush sneeze, and thought he'd mark the spot to fire his next shot.

Tim watched some men carry someone back of the lines. He must have been wounded in the face, for there was a blue shirt over the head. Tim turned from the thought that pressed up into his consciousness. One of the orderlies who carried the wounded soldier was crying, not guardedly, like a man, but with heartbroken sobs like a boy.

Tim was glad he didn't know the men with whom he fought, for he might have given down when he saw them fall, instead of looking the other way and holding his fire as close as he could aim.

"Why all this waitin'?" a soldier on his knees shouted to Tim after there had been too many minutes of silences. Their ears roared so from the noise that they talked like ones who had gone deaf. "Have we won? Got them runnin'?"

"If I thought we had, I'd break for that crick and drink me a belly full of water," a man with blood caked on his forehead said.

Tim thought his wound looked as if he'd got it trying to crawl through a thorny haw tree.

"I ain't had my breakfast," Tim said. He could have reached out his right hand to touch one newly dead. "I ain't had a bite since last night about seven."

"And it must be nearin' noon."

"Must be."

"I figure we're lucky to be alive."

"Me too."

They didn't turn their heads to keep from seeing the stretch-bearers shove into one of their ambulance wagons the man with the blue shirt covering his face.

As Tim remembered it, there were only two more active and hot skirmishes. He was conscious that the smoke hung like a cloud over them and burned their lungs and dried their throats and that he and the man with the scratch on his forehead were together when the order came to retreat.

"Hell! Retreat! That's a new word for Lyon," the man said.

"Looks like Sturgis up there givin' orders."

"You don't suppose——"

Tim looked at the man and knew he couldn't say what he was wondering either.

This was the strangest part of the whole strange day, this silent bedraggled, tail-between-legs departure from "Bloody Hill" on Wilson's Creek. Around to the south to ford the creek and then on the Cassville road for Springfield.

Tim had few thoughts. He remembered once that he should have a horse under him, and again that he'd never got word to General Lyon about General Frémont and the two companies of men.

Tim was back in Springfield eating a plate full of unsalted beef when he heard that General Lyon was dead and that somehow the officers had lost track of the body once and had to go back with a white flag to get Sterling Price to let them hunt for it around the bodies of the dead. They'd finally found it. The face was completely hidden by a blue homespun shirt.

Tim Larkin knew he shouldn't be able to finish his plate of food, but he felt himself spooning the meat into his mouth and tasting the unsalted flavor and swallowing it down in ravenous gulps.

Tim was once more riding his own mule. He had searched for him last night until nearly dark and had almost given up

hope when he found him hitched to a decrepit-looking cart loaded with pots and pans. It might have looked cruel to leave the man stranded with his produce, but Tim got his mule. The man had claimed he had bought the animal from a soldier for fifty dollars. Tim knew that wasn't true, because any good mule could sell for twice that much to people trying to get out of the vicinity of Springfield before Price and Ben McCulloch took over.

Certainly the Missourians with the Confederate general would pursue the fleeing train, and civilians would not be any safer than soldiers. Certainly their produce would be used without payment.

The very contemplation of this awful distance to Rolla, and the fact that the distance would be about twenty-five miles farther by wagon train than horseback, was worse to Tim than the thought of meeting Price and McCulloch again. A battle was sharp and deafening, but soon over, while this eternal crawling forward over hills and through hollows, behind incessantly collapsed wagons, or mired horses or balking mules, was almost unbearable.

Tim wished he could be mustered out with many of the others who had served their three months. He realized he was homesick and tired of army life and that he hated most of his leaders.

In the army he had completely lost sight of what they were fighting for. On second thought, he knew that this was because Lyon wasn't there to dash up and down the line with encouragement and inspiration. Sigel spoke broken English, Sturgis was shy, and Plummer had not the authority.

At the end of the first day they had traveled but fifteen miles from Springfield, and the men were grumbling like a corn-husking crew in damp weather.

At the end of the second day the grumbling had mounted into a faint roar. It seemed Sigel's men were always last getting up in the morning, starting on the march, preparing their food,

and besides, hadn't Sigel lost his right to command when he lost his entire company?

By the third day Sturgis had been elected commander, which after all was a doubtful honor, since there was no one else with sufficient rank.

It was into a weary, dragging day that Duffy came up beside Tim and started talking as if they had never been separated for ten days and by a battle.

"I might-a knowed you'd still be ridin' that mule," Duffy said calmly. "I been lookin' for you in the foot soldiers."

"I been scared you had deserted to Price or got snowed under at the crick," Tim said, trying to match Duffy's unconcern.

"Might near did both. If I'd knowed Lyon wasn't still in command I guess I'd-a been more reckless."

The two rode along together, making slow talk.

"Plummer's not bad. In fact I think he's apt to be a comin' general."

"Do you want to know why Price and McCulloch ain't burnin' our trail chasin' us? It's shore not because Price ain't amind to."

And then Duffy told Tim the whole story of General Price, who "had won more battles than McCulloch had ever fought," offering to turn over his entire command to McCulloch if he would just stay up in Missouri and fight and how Price couldn't push McCulloch into a battle. The morning Lyon surprised them at breakfast, the two were arguing about when and how to fight the Federals. Ben McCulloch didn't like the Missourians; he thought Rains was a fool or a coward. Price would probably have done better without McCulloch or any of the Southern troops. Price sure knew which direction was up.

"If I wasn't afraid somehow Lyon, dead, would find out I'd deserted his cause, I guess I'd go back to Price," Duffy acted like a schoolboy caught cheating.

"Maybe that's what keeps me from runnin' off home right now," Tim confessed.

"You too?"

"Sure. It's what they call 'morale' in the papers. None of this army has got any. If McCulloch had any real gumption he'd jump on that rear company and take this whole damn army captive. We'd lay down and give up like some mangey dog."

"I guess it's the threat of Pillow comin' in from the southeast that's got the generals scared spit dry."

"What do you mean southeast?"

"Oh, don't you know? There's a Confederate army comin' up the St. Francis or White River into the state, and if not that way, in through New Madrid. Haven't you heard about Jeff Thompson?"

"Say all this again," Tim felt a keen excitement that he dared not show. "You mean New Madrid, Missouri?"

"Sure."

Tim cleared his throat. "You wasn't aimin' to try to get down there where the fightin' is goin' to be, was you?"

"Kind of thought I would."

Tim's heart was pounding in his throat. "Count me in with you."

"Sturgis has more scouts than he knows what to do with; he'd be glad to let us go off snoopin' around. He's shakin' in his boots about this army straight from the south anyhow."

Tim tried to keep the quiver out of his hands. Nine years was a long time. She'd been seventeen in '52. She was probably married and bringing up a family of little Lovie's.

Even if she was married up and moved away, he still had his pa down there around New Madrid that he would like to see.

PART VIII

August 1861

GENERAL STURGIS not only liked the idea of Duffy and Tim going into the southeastern section of the state, he went so far as to get them transferred to the Cape Girardeau division. Jeff Thompson was fighting for secession down there, and all those who hadn't been forced to take the oath of allegiance just hadn't encountered any of Jeff's army. The oath went something like this.

Know all men that I —— of County of —— State of Missouri do solemnly swear that I will bear true faith and allegiance to the State of Missouri and support the Constitution of the State, and that I will not give aid, comfort, information, protection, or encouragement to the enemies or opposers of the Missouri State Guards or their allies, the armies of the Confederate States, upon the penalty of death for treason.

However, Jeff Thompson was certainly the same kind of barb in the flesh to General Pillow as Sterling Price had been to Ben

McCulloch. Pillow wanted his men trained, uniformed, and in great numbers up and down the Mississippi River in neat forts and ordered camps, whereas Jeff Thompson wanted his men as uncertain as a flea on a coon dog's back.

It became Tim's and Duffy's duty to try to predict where Jeff would jump next. This time they might both go, because Jeff had such a loose organization that a man could come and go as fights materialized.

Of course, a soldier with him always had to feed and clothe himself, now and then even furnish his own ammunition.

Like Sterling Price and Ben McCulloch, Jeff Thompson expected the country in which he was located to support his army; not with vouchers or cash, as Lyon had done, but gratis. At last Tim and Duffy located the "Swamp Fox," as Jeff was called by his friends, by following foraged areas.

Jeff was an astonishing man to Tim, until Duffy remarked about their likeness. "If Jeff Thompson had your hair and beard and you had his, the army couldn't tell which was which. That is, of course, if you'd learn to toot your own horn a little louder and spout poetry."

Tim took another look at Jeff Thompson, as rangy as a Western steer after a long, hard winter, and about as full of fight.

"Do I look that tall?" Tim asked.

"Not quite, because you don't have yourself topped off with that regular comet's tail hair, and of course that white hat he wears looks like a cloud walkin' around on stilts."

Tim and Duffy couldn't be a part of his dragoons, because these were hand-picked for good horseflesh, and Tim's mule kept him out, but Jeff Thompson was glad enough to let them come along as regulars.

Tim gave his name as Larkin and even told that his pa lived down near New Madrid. Duffy was scared when Tim did that.

"What if they's somebody from down there in this crowd?" Duffy said that night when they were alone.

"Oh, that's all right," Tim scoffed, "I said I'd been in Californy for the last ten, twelve years and that I hadn't been home since I could remember."

"You're takin' too big a risk."

Tim didn't say why he did it. He honestly didn't know, but he thought maybe it had something to do with his getting away easier to report back to Cape Girardeau. He could get leave to go see his pa, whom he hadn't seen in years—and Lovie! Might even try to see her first. Not even ask leave. Usually the men just rode off home, saying they'd be back in a day or two. Why be so eternal careful? Duffy was getting too much of an old woman.

"If you ask me it's just another way of diggin' a grave and hangin' a rope over it." Duffy combed his sideburns with care. "If I'd a knowed you was goin' to be such a fool I'd never-a suggested comin' down here in the first place. Then we might a gone on up to St. Louie and you'd a got to view Frémont sheddin' a drenchin' of crocodile tears over General Lyon's body."

Always, when their talk grew thin they could deepen it by introducing Lyon and Frémont. They both felt that the latter should be hung along with "Jeff Davis to a sour apple tree."

It was on the last Saturday in August, and Tim and Duffy had gone fishing to furnish the meat for their squad when they got the idea. There had been a week of rain, and so Thompson had taken his men out of the swamps up north of Bloomfield so that they weren't too far from Cape Girardeau.

"I think one of us ort to get away tonight and report. Somebody's goin' to think we're not stickin' to duty down here and mark us as deserters."

Tim baited his hook and cast before he answered. "I been thinkin' that too. Which one goes?"

Tim had a queer feeling in his spine. He knew why he'd been so anxious to come down this way. He knew that Cape

Girardeau might have been Jericho for all its nearness to Larkin's Landing. He couldn't possibly get off long enough to go to the Cape and then down to see Lovie.

"I'd say we should go at this decidin' fair. The one that catches the next fish gits to go," Duffy said, with a wise motion of his jaws. "Draw in your line and we'll cast together."

"Sure." But Tim knew if he went this time that Duffy would go next, and they might be closer to New Madrid then.

He didn't want to speak to Lovie. He just wanted to look at her again. To see how she had changed, to find if she were happy.

They cast their lines together, and Tim held his slack. He hoped a sucker would get away with his bait. He wanted to see his pa, and maybe Emmie and her little boy, who'd be around eleven years old now. No, that was a lie. He didn't give "two whoops in hog holler" what had happened to Emmie or her little boy. It was Lovie.

"How old do you think I look?" Tim asked Duffy.

"Somers around thirty. Why, you aimin' to make a shine to some of these women down here?"

Tim tried to laugh, but when a person was fishing and trying to keep his voice down, it wasn't easy to make a laugh sound natural.

"I wouldn't mind findin' me a good woman around here." Duffy grinned like a sly dog. "Did I ever tell you about the woman I took up with when I was keepin' near Price before Springfield?"

"No." Tim didn't want to hear it. He could feel a twitch to his line. He hoped that Duffy hadn't seen.

"You *got* one!"

Tim pulled in his fish, a fine silver perch with flecks on its flat sides. The flecks glistened in the light like Lovie Romines' hair.

"It's easier for you anyhow," Duffy said. "You can tell that you're goin' to see your pap."

"Sure."

"I think—we're apt to catch more fish if we move south a piece," Duffy finished off with a completely changed subject so that Tim would be warned that there were men coming.

It wasn't as hard as Tim had thought it would be, this getting off to see his pa. In fact, he wished afterwards that he'd just ridden off without any bother, even though it did please Jeff Thompson to be like a father to his soldiers.

"If you've any brothers at home of war age, you might bring them along to join up," Thompson said, before he struck a pose that looked like an elongated Napoleon and burst into one of his usual jingles:

*"Come to join up
You ungrateful pup,
For this your state
Shattered by hate."*

Tim thanked him and promised to remember the poem. Tim was glad Jeff was peculiar and could be laughed at. After Lyon, Tim didn't want a general who made him feel inspired and loyal. Especially if this general was on the wrong side, as Jeff Thompson was.

"Tell your young brothers that Pillow will feed them wormy sidemeat out of a barrel if they go to New Madrid to enlist. While I

*"I feed my men from the trees and streams
Under God's almighty beams
Of sunshine out in Missouri."*

"I sure will, General. I sure will."

The next morning Tim started out at daylight. For a while he thought he was going to have to go straight to New Madrid, because one of the men who had run into him and Duffy while they were out fishing came up on his horse. Fortunately, at the

next farm he turned off, saying he'd planned to make a call on the daughter.

Must have been going for Sunday breakfast, this early in the day, Tim thought.

"Hope you find your pa well," the man shouted to Tim. "My pa's knowed him for twenty or twenty-five year. They went to N'Orleans onct together. Good luck."

That would be the year after Romie was born. Emmie had told that, or had she?

Tim whipped up his mule and rode south until he was sure he wasn't being trailed, and then headed out north and east at the first corner.

He'd been given three days leave. All right, this mule would know what travel was before he got back.

In Cape Girardeau, Tim saw the first posters of the Emancipation Proclamation that General Frémont had issued for the State of Missouri. A proclamation that set all slaves free whose masters had lifted arms or given aid to the Confederacy. And a declaration of martial law that would mean any man could be shot for treason if he was caught carrying a gun when he wasn't actually in an army.

"He sure aims to stop bushwhackin', I guess," Tim said to the crowd in general.

Tim couldn't see what would come of this order except to cause even more killing in the state. Nobody would be safe, and all the slaves of the State Guard soldiers would be automatically freed. Polly's brother's slaves! What would become of them? Three or four thousand dollars' worth of property confiscated in a sweep.

Frémont didn't have that right! He certainly didn't. An order like that would make good Union men want to throw down their cause. Be damned if it wasn't for Duffy!

Tim tied his mule to a hitch rack in front of a saloon, just in case someone might see him, and swung off down the street

to the back of Union headquarters. It was late afternoon on Sunday, and there might be no chance of finding the commander. He didn't care! He wished he had the guts to desert and go home to help Old Man Arnett and his boys. Yes, I do! Frémont! Lincoln ought to know better than put such fools as Frémont in command!

Tim hated to have himself announced as one of Frémont's scouts, and yet that was his official title, so he gave it to the orderly who came to the door to let him in.

"I'll report you to General Grant."

Grant, Grant. Where had Tim heard that name before? He would probably have plenty of time to remember if Grant kept people warming benches the way Frémont had done. Damn the whole system. Tim threw his hat on a bench.

But here was a fish of another fin, for the orderly returned before Tim so much as got his long legs used to hunching around an ordinary chair again.

Tim followed him into another room.

"Larkin?"

"Yes sir." Tim looked down into the gray eyes of the man at the table. He didn't look bored, or even tired, just relaxed with his hands before him on the table and his shoulders loose as any ordinary man might sit after he'd eaten a good meal and pushed back his plate.

"General Grant?" Tim asked, still a little unbelieving.

The general smiled what Tim thought was an economical smile; it took almost no effort and hardly broke his face up into grooves and spaces.

"I come from Jeff Thompson," Tim said, his own ill humor drawing from his mind.

"So I've been told."

Another smile that was just as slight, but because he looked directly into Tim's eyes when he spoke, Tim felt he made up for facial effort by attention. Tim contrasted this man to Frémont, sitting there before a table looking at a map all the

time Tim talked about Lyon. Tim wished he had something really important to tell to this man, who he thought could easily have been a Clay County farmer.

"Maybe there's nothin' in all this. Me and Duffy Jones, though, decided we'd better report."

"Duffy Jones. Fight in the Mexican War? Talk the ears off a brass monkey?"

"That's Duffy." Then Tim knew where he'd heard of Grant. "He's spoke of you. Thinks you and Lyon and Price, if altogether at once, could put things back the way they belonged in a couple of weeks."

"There's Robert E. Lee he left out." Grant's voice was droll.

"Just oversight, I reckon." Tim matched Grant. "Duffy thinks Jeff Thompson is pretty good if you could just be sure he wouldn't bust out in poetry in the middle of a scrap. Thompson exaggerates his numbers about three to one, though his dragoons is mighty quick. He won't wait on General Pillow, he says, unless Pillow comes up before the last of October. He's got a plan for takin' Ironton and the supply depot and marchin' on into St. Louie."

"Don't tell General Frémont; he'll believe it."

Tim had to laugh out. It was such a relief to know that somebody else had opinions, but it surprised him that General Grant would be so frank.

"I've made plans to set up places closer to your camps where you can make reports. The secret service is still badly organized in Missouri. Don't put anything in writing."

"I know."

"Tell Duffy for me he can't trust the women in these parts. They are all for the South."

What a memory the man must have! Duffy and women!
"Yes sir."

"I am to go to Cairo sometime this week. Colonel Plummer will take over here. Make your reports to him."

"Yes sir."

General Grant stood and held out his hand to Tim, who still had to look down to look into his quiet gray eyes.

As Tim stopped in for a mess of hotcakes and molasses with fried ham on the side, he felt so elated he couldn't keep from grinning. People had about as much to do with which side you was on in a fight as the main causes. Now take that man Grant!

Tim thought maybe he shouldn't go on to New Madrid. This was war, and no time to go knocking up the past, especially with a man like General Grant depending on him!

But what would he say to the man at Jeff Thompson's camp who had known his pa? Or why he had come back without staying the three days? Men in this army didn't come back ahead of time. He might get some word of Pillow if he went on to New Madrid.

Tim hadn't gone more than five miles down the New Madrid road when he was stopped by a couple of men with rifles. He'd thought as he left the eating house that maybe he shouldn't try to go on before daylight, especially since Missouri was supposed to be under martial law. This close to the town these men would be Union soldiers, though in this half dark you couldn't tell. Probably couldn't tell any better by daylight. More'n likely they didn't wear uniforms. More of Frémont's doin's. Was a body supposed to have a password?

Nobody spoke after the first command to halt. Tim could feel the silence like darkness, growing deeper. He could hear katydids in the fencerows and frogs off in some hollow, and still farther away a late whippoorwill that made his hair tingle and seem to rise on the back of his head, and then he heard the thumping of his own pulses in his ears.

"Name?"

"Larkin," Tim said.

"He's the one," the other man said.

Tim seemed to have heard the voice before, and it had nothing to do with Pud Parsons, and yet that was who Tim thought about. Only Pud had been alone, and he wasn't wise for his years.

It would do no good to knock one man down, because the other man had a gun too, and Tim could feel the nearness of those two irons. He couldn't whirl with his mule and make a run for it, because there was a fine strong horse pressed on either side, so close that he could feel the warmth from their bodies on his legs.

He couldn't remember just what he'd planned to say if this ever happened to him. He was probably getting scared before he was hurt.

"What do you want?" he heard himself ask in a voice as steady as General Grant's.

"You."

He was relieved of his gun, the bridle reins, and his hat. He wondered about this last for the instant before a foul-smelling rag was tied over his mouth, and then there was no use wondering. They tied his hands back of him so tight his shoulders ached already. Tim knew he had plunged as far as humanly possible into despair.

This wasn't Frémont's martial law. This was Jack Law, or was it Jeff's law? And somehow even worse, a rope across an already-dug grave, as Duffy had foretold.

The mule moved off between the two horses, well content with the companionship. Why wasn't this a fractious animal that would plunge and buck and kick a way clear? Tim thought of kicking him in the flanks. He remembered the pony Old Man Arnett had promised little Timmy if he wouldn't kick his mother's horse in the flanks. The pony got into new green corn and foundered before Timmy had owned him a year. Timmy wouldn't have another pony. He wanted a pony that would grow to a horse not a "pony-pony that couldn't hold all it could eat."

Tim started easing his feet out of the stirrups, but the man on his right guessed what he was trying to do.

"Never mind the flanks unless you want your feet tied under you. We got this mule hog-tight."

What did the men who took Newby say to him? Tim had never thought of that before. Did they give him a chance to talk?

And little Honey Love would never know what became of her pap any more than Perry knew. Or did Perry know what had become of Patrick Larkin? He'd been up and down the river on many boats. Maybe he knew more about Pap than Tim did. Maybe Pap was dead, and that was why they were taking him away. But he had said he had just come back from California and hadn't seen his pa for years. But that sounded fishy. He'd have looked his pap up first thing.

They rode for a mile or two down the road and then turned off toward the west. And here the road was too narrow for the two horses and the mule, so the men stopped and tied Tim's feet together under the patient mule's belly.

Why had he ever come back to this part of the country?

He knew.

Why hadn't he gone on with Plummer's battalion? He could have, after he'd proved himself that day beside the creek; maybe become an officer.

He knew.

Why—but these were as foolish questions as to ask himself why he'd used Harmony Blankinship's money. Why he'd given that first high piece of land to the Lord. He knew all the answers could be put into four words:

Because he'd wanted to.

But why hadn't he stayed down here with Lovie? Why hadn't he made love to Mima, or Harmony? Why hadn't he lost his land like Newby or gone off to Kansas without holding on? Why hadn't it been his dead body that Newby found? Why hadn't he been shot at Wilson's Creek, or even wounded?

Now Tim had some questions that were as hard to answer as the others were easy. Why were some folks always making fools of themselves and having to pay for it straight off, while others could get protection, safety, time after time? But there wasn't anything permanent in this protection, not even if you'd given a church and burying ground.

Tim knew that if he ever were permitted to go back to Clay County that he'd not be a saint. He couldn't pray out loud in church and he couldn't stop off swearing, but he'd sure be a sight better. Yes, he'd even give Harmony what he owed her, and tell Polly why.

Though the gag was still pressing into his mouth till his beard itched his chin almost unbearably, and the knot was making his neck ache, he felt sudden fear that maybe he'd made another bargain with the Lord that he'd have to keep if some miracle set him free. He was shaking all over for fear the Lord had heard. Maybe he could talk himself out of this. Once he'd got away from a posse by outtalking a little gambler. Maybe he could do it again.

The thought of paying Harmony back was present in his mind along with the sight of a limb out over a drop and a rope with a slipknot. Harmony's two hundred dollars had bought one hundred sixty acres of land. He could give her back her money with compound interest. That would be a problem to figure out through the darkness to keep from hurrying ahead to the finish. But to tell Polly, and bear shame before people! At compound interest two hundred dollars would be close to three hundred dollars in four years; in eight years it would be considerable over four hundred; in ten years just about five hundred dollars.

What would Harmony Blankinship know about takin' care of that much money? Five hundred dollars was more money than the carpenter could make in three years. If he ever did come back, he'd use her five hundred to take himself off to South America or at least to Colorado or Utah.

Tim shook with a groan.

"Lord, it's not fair to hold a man to such a witless promise."

But he'd kept the other promises he'd made to the Lord, and the Lord had withheld his hand.

Tim Larkin heard himself pray as he'd never prayed before, because he could see a light down in among the trees that came from a campfire where people were passing back and forth, and he thought his end was near.

Tim was taken from his mule and led closer to the fire. There were five men standing about so that their faces were in shadows, but their legs were long and lank and scissored the light as they moved to and fro.

"We decided there warn't use botherin' the general with this," the man on Tim's right said.

And once again in less than ten years Tim Larkin saw a man fingering with impatience a hanging rope.

"Come up here and git a good look at him, both of you."

Two tallish fellows under big homemade straw hats came closer. Their backs were to the fire, so that Tim couldn't see their faces.

"If Jeff Thompson finds it out and we've made a mistake, it won't go easy with us." Tim recognized the voice of his companion of the morning.

"You're one to talk," the larger of the two who were staring at Tim whirled on the speaker. "All of this was your idy."

"It was not. I jist got to suspectin', and so rid over to see if you recollected anything about ary brother you got who come from Californy."

"Does he still claim his name is Larkin?"

"Sure."

Tim had a queer feeling that they thought because he had a gag in his mouth that he couldn't hear.

These two boys standing before him must be Romie and Leon Larkin. Why hadn't he thought that these Larkin boys would be of war age before he gave his real name?

"Does it look like him?"

"How do you think I could tell with that rag over his mouth?" Romie said hotly. (Tim remembered that Leon stuttered.) "Hit ain't like I seen him yesterday. Hit's been ten year or more."

"Not quite," Tim thought. Romie had grown to be quite a man, still a little bigger than Leon, though not as tall as Pa nor as straight.

"I'd sooner you took him before Jeff Thompson," Romie insisted.

"Why the hell bother Thompson?"

"You're certain sure he's a spy?"

"Sure, else why would he go to Cape Girardeau when he said he was headin' out to New Madrid to visit his pap? I couldn't make it into the Cape myself, but I'll bet money he went to see a Union general there. This Grant maybe. And sure as hell we caught him comin' out of Cape Girardeau as big as Ike."

Tim knew now that the Lord had deserted him, and Polly would be a mighty young and well set-up widow woman.

"Ain't you g-goin' to let him say ary w-word in his own d-defense?" That would be Leon.

Tim wanted his arms free to grab his shoulders. This boy was his half brother!

"And ain't you a pretty one to be suggestin' that." The young fellow holding the rope was getting tired of waiting. "You and Romie both sayin' what you did about this sonsagun usin' your pap's name jist because he'd visited you onct and run out and left you with a treed coon."

Tim rubbed his itching chin against his shoulder. His eyes stung too. It was a gesture as if bored and unconcerned, while in reality it was one of those necessary moves to scratch an itching spot when the hands were occupied.

"Dad blame him, let's hurry and git this over. I ain't amind to spend my whole Sunday night hangin' a spy." This from the rope twitcher.

Next time Tim had anything to do with a hanging he did

hope somebody would see that a patient man held the hemp.

"I'd sooner we pulled that mask up over his eyes and shot him the way they do in the real army."

Lord forbid. Tim could feel himself being wounded in seven different places, and none of them mortal, and left out here to die in slow agony. There was plenty to say in favor of hanging.

These fellers, so tarnationally slow. Like they was decidin' how to cut up a beef; in steaks or roasts.

"Quick! Cover that fire," the man who had suggested the shooting ordered. In less than a minute, when the thudding of horses' hoofs had grown so close that you could judge there were about four riders, the place where Tim stood was as dark as the rest of the wood.

Why couldn't it be Duffy, or even Jeff Thompson himself?

But how would either of them know to look here? Tim remembered the spot where the fire burned on under ashes, and after all, his feet weren't tied and nobody was holding him. He lunged forward and gave a great kick into the midst of the fire, so that sparks soared up into the trees and a flame spiraled like an Indian signal light.

"Halt in there!" It was a command that broke through the darkness like a bugle call, and could have come from none but Jeff Thompson's "gasconoding" throat.

If he could just talk, and Jeff Thompson would just listen (though he might not believe). He certainly wouldn't let a squad of kids line him up and drill him full of holes without hearing his story. In the moment of violent, though muffled, swearing that came from his captors, Tim was making his thanks to a Power beyond himself.

Tim had no way of being sure that old Lark wouldn't disown him, but it was certainly worth a mighty good try. It must be twenty or thirty miles to New Madrid from here, and Larkin's Landing was even farther south, but Jeff Thompson—

"What do we have here?" Jeff boomed from astride his fine

bay horse, his gun leveled, as were those of his three companions. "Brighten up that fire before I do a little plain and fancy shooting."

Three or four of the boys bent to mend the fire.

"Say, look here, aren't you my men?" Jeff asked.

"Yes sir."

"Who gave you orders to go out and play judge and jury and God all at once?" He had swung off his horse and was striding around to the other side of the fire so that the light shone up into his flushed face and played off his white hat brim like lapping water in the sun. "Take off that gag, so I can see who that man is."

Tim thought his jaws ached more when the stinking thing was removed and the blood started circulating again.

"Aren't you the man who asked for leave of three days?"

"Yes sir," Tim answered, wondering if there was another man with a better memory, except maybe General Grant. Dozens of men must have asked to go away over Sunday, and Thompson was the kind of general who wanted to feel he was all-powerful, so attended to details that most leaders would have given to others.

"What's your name?"

"Timothy Taylor Larkin."

"That's it, General, that's why we knowed he was a spy."

And then four of them were talking at once, telling about Leon and Romie being sons of the one Larkin down near New Madrid, and the trip to Cape Girardeau instead of south.

"I-I'm sure h-he's the one that visited our place once," Leon said.

"Yes, he ain't changed only to wear his beard cut a mite shorter. I 'low I'd recollect him anywhere, cause his hair and beard is so black."

"So he went to Cape Girardeau?" Jeff Thompson was stroking his chin.

His face looked so flushed that Tim knew he'd been some-

where himself to take on a pretty good load, though he could carry it if any man could.

"And who, my good man, or a stinking skunk, did you see in the Cape?"

"A girl with blue eyes and quick ankles that made the best hotcakes I've had in ten year or since my stepmother Emmie made them for me." Tim wasn't sure but that Jeff Thompson's swagger wasn't catching, because he could never have said that all of himself.

"And was that all?"

"Yes sir, I'm sorry to say." Tim felt he sounded like a very devil of a fellow, but he had to say what was expected of him. He remembered how he'd outtalked Burgess. "These boys here don't know that my pa, Patrick Larkin, was married before he come to Larkin's Landin'."

"He's a liar," Romie pushed forward. "He ain't no more Pa's son than you aire, else why wouldn't he-a named it to us when he was down there?"

"H-he came when we'd jist k-kilt hogs I-I recollect, and h-he took a shine to our aunt Lovie Romines."

General Jeff Thompson held up his hand. "Let's start at this end. Is there anybody here who will risk going into Cape Girardeau to find this certain maker of hotcakes? In a case like this we must pursue while the trail is hot. If we have a spy, he shall have the publicity due such a person, and not a silent dangling from a tree like an overripe paw-paw."

Tim closed his eyes. And he'd actually felt thankful when Jeff Thompson came up; he'd even kicked the fire. If Duffy could only come now with the whole U.S. Army from the Cape, and rescue him with a swoop of triumph. But Duffy was probably sleeping like a bear in winter, gorged and content.

"At once! Who will go back to the Cape?"

The two who had waylaid Tim offered to go.

"That still won't prove I ain't usin' my right name," Tim said stubbornly. "When I stopped at Larkin's Landin' back in '52 I

didn't say my name was Larkin. I called myself Taylor for a very good reason. Before I left, my pa knowed who I was."

And then Romie suggested what Tim had been afraid to suggest. "There ain't but one way to be certain. That's to go fetch Pap. All this about the Cape won't rightly prove nothin' cause he could of slipped a note sommers."

"You are as right as rain in dry weather," General Jeff Thompson said. "How long would it take you to go get your pa?"

"Around two days. Pa ain't got as good a animal to ride as me."

"You can take my mule," Tim offered. "He's a good rider and has had plenty of practice."

Tim wondered at his coolness. What if his pap wouldn't come? Or even worse, suppose he denounced him as a fraud here before these Confederates. And that nervous-fingered boy would probably get cheated out of hanging him because it would be a much grander occasion, maybe down at New Madrid, with General Pillow looking on.

Two days!

PART IX

September 1861

TIM LAY on the floor of the stout log cabin and looked out through the chinks in the roof at the fine blue September sky. It was stuffy and damp and the food was bad and spiders and mosquitoes and sand fleas seemed to infest the place, yet Tim was not anxious to leave, for he had the feeling that these scraps of sky were the last of this world's beauty he could have.

The two days dragged into three, and Tim began to wonder if he'd lost count somehow, because he couldn't actually see sunrise and sunset, or see the leaves and flowers turn to face the light, or feel the breeze die down as evening drew in, or smell the dry heat of noonday, or hear the birds gathering for going south.

All of these things had been like breathing to a man without a cold in the head, and now they became torture like a stopped-up nose.

He tried to recall the finest things he'd ever known; the first

gold he'd found, and the way it rolled in the hollow of his wet palm; little Timmy with his first store-bought pants; Honey Love in the white swaddling shawl, or holding his big silver watch to her ear when she was bigger, or saying "Arnett says you think I'm always right"; Harmony Blankinship wondering why he never paid her more attention on the night after Newby was murdered; or Polly coming with Polk to lay her hands on his shoulders.

Suddenly he knew his cheeks were wet. Polly! She was the last to come to his mind. He could feel her cool forehead pressed against his cheek the way she did when she came and sat beside him, and her voice when she said, "It would be hard for any woman not to love you, Tim." And not blaming him if he wanted to bury Newby in the night so that he could go off before day.

"Oh, Polly! Polly!" He knew that always he had loved her and nobody else and he'd been pigheaded and sometimes mean. It was Polly he'd have to make it up to if he ever got out of here. He'd have to tell her about Harmony's money when he gave it back, and make her see that he couldn't help it. But Polly would understand. What if she'd read of his hanging in a Liberty paper and all her people would feel disgrace? And she'd been so proud.

He was pacing the small cabin with its boarded-up windows and sealed chimney. The hard dirt floor with its spiders and fleas made no sound when he tramped to and fro. There must be some way out. He was too young to die. Twenty-six years younger than his ma, who was still hearty and strong. Less than thirty-five, and with five children to raise and educate, so that they wouldn't have to work as hard as he'd worked as a boy. And little Honey Love to make a lady and see that she got a good man that was worthy of her and not a skunk of a fellow like her pap. And Polly to make life easier for. "O God, I've got to get out of here." He groaned as he tramped, so loud that he didn't hear the men coming through the woods until someone

unfastened the door and let the late afternoon sunshine pour in, filled with gold flecks that swirled and rose upwards before Tim's startled gaze.

"Come out into the light with your hands up."

Tim stumbled forward over the door sill, still blinded by the sudden change from dark to light. He didn't know whether he was facing his pa or some men from New Madrid to take him down to General Pillow for trial. His pa had driven him away from Lovie and had not admitted his kin; why had he, Tim, thought he would admit him now to save his skin?

"Hello, Timmy," Tim seemed to hear the voice deeper than any voice he'd ever known. "They tell me you've just missed a hangin' because you used your own name."

"Pap!"

"In war times people have to be mighty careful, I reckon," old Lark said, and gave Tim time to swallow the knot in his throat.

For two days old Lark stayed around camp with his three sons. Tim wondered if his father felt strange when he remembered that he had two other boys up in north Missouri. Tim hadn't mentioned them or Minerva. Let Romie and Leon think old Lark's wife had died years ago.

Tim had kept himself close to camp, working on gun stocks, molding bullets, whetting bowie knives, or polishing saddles. The day old Lark had set out to go home it was Jeff Thompson himself who advised Tim to ride halfway with his father.

Old Lark had borrowed one of old man Romines' horses to ride, so that he wouldn't be up around Bloomfield without an animal to bring him home.

It was early morning, with a faint haze over the hills and fields, as if the earth were steaming after a good clean bath. The trees hadn't started turning, but the corn and cane were brown and the weeds in the fencerows were blooming in yellow and strong purples.

"How do you aim to get out of Jeff Thompson's army now,

Tim?" old Lark asked as they got free of the woods and had a feeling they were alone.

Tim looked quickly at his pa. "I ain't quite decided."

"I think maybe you'd better stay around till there's a scrap and then hightail it out like you had hounds at your heels."

"Might be." Tim felt his lips curving into a grin. "Why'd you come up if you knowed what I was doin'?"

"Lord a'mighty, I ain't thinkin' I'm God."

"You did onct. Or was it me that told you I thought you was settin' yourself up as such."

"Somethin' like that." Old Lark's gray beard shook with laughter. "You sure did put on airs that night, but no more than I did."

"I'm glad you made me go home." Tim found it wasn't as hard to say as he had thought it would be.

"So you got five young uns."

"Yes sir. As pretty a little girl as you ever set eyes on, and four boys." Tim wished he hadn't said it, the minute the words were out, for his pa's face looked suddenly old. Tim had been sorry to hear that Emmie had died last year of fever; his pa must be lonesome there with just Boy for company. "Listen, Pa, why don't you come up to Clay County when this war's over. My land will still be there even though the bushwhackers should burn my house and chop down my orchard and carry off my fences."

Tim was talking fast to give his pa time to make up his mind. "And Ma would be glad to see you. For sixteen year she kept herself lookin' young, waitin' for you, but after I come back from down here in '52 she just give up tryin' to stay the same as you'd knowed her. Drew and me kind of felt she got the knowledge out of my mind somehow that you wasn't comin'."

"Your ma's Scotch; it's more than likely that she did." Old Lark took out his pipe and cracked it against his saddle horn before he dug it into his shirt pocket to fill it up. "I reckon that's the reason I dassn't go back. Even if I'd tell her I'd stay

if she'd never ask where I'd been all these years, and she'd promise—I'd know she knew. Minerva Larkin was a right smart woman, Tim. That's why my conscience never bothered me much about how you boys was gettin' on."

Maybe it was a mistake for a woman to be too smart. Tim thought he'd have to see that little Honey Love learned early how to keep her smartness hidden.

The two rode on in silence for maybe a mile.

Old Lark smoked.

Tim tried to break into the silence to ask what he knew his father would never, of his own accord, bring up into talk.

"What are their names?" Old Lark asked, "these young uns of yours."

"Timmy and Arnett, that's Polly's family name, and Honey—no, Anne, and George and the baby Stephen." Tim hated to stop. He wished he could have said one of them was Patrick. It wasn't right for an old man with six sons not to have a namesake.

"Are they well set-up young uns? No puny ones?"

"No runts."

"Emmie's last baby was frail. When it died with the fever first I kind of knowed Emmie wouldn't survive it. She'd lost two other babies."

Sadness became a little too heavy until Tim heard his pa chuckle: the same deep sound that comes bubbling from a great kettle over a slow but steady fire. "That Boy though, he can lick his weight in wildcats. He's growed big for his age. I figger he's goin' to be maybe stouter than you when he's got his growth. Wanted to come along when I come up here; said he'd like to catch him a Federal so's to git a good revolver."

Tim joined in the laugh. Boy and Timmy would probably be a good team.

The name of Lovie Romines did not cross their quiet talk.

Tim didn't remember until he got back to camp that it was because of Lovie that he had come so far south in the first place.

He could still ask the boys.

Twice he almost made it, but both times something interrupted, and in another week he managed to slip away during a skirmish in a canebrake.

It was on his flight that he saw the woman ahead of him in a narrow lane. She was tall and well set-up, and wore a man's hat to shade her face. She had on short skirts that showed her fine strong legs almost up to the calf, and she swung along ahead of him with a stride that even a man wouldn't have to go into a mincing gait to keep step with her.

Tim jerked himself back. Even if that could be Lovie Romines, she'd turn him over to the Confederates, or she might even be so eye-filling under that hat that he couldn't turn his head back north, or again it probably wasn't Lovie.

He turned his mule about and went to the next crossroads.

A man rightly needed something to wonder about on quiet nights, or when he was alone.

PART X

October 1861

AS TIM CAME UP through the northeast part of Clay County, along the lanes that he knew like his own barn doors, he didn't hurry, because he was on the lookout for bushwhackers or State Guards, though he supposed most of them had gone south to either watch or join up in the mightiest display of army maneuvers that the state would ever have. Frémont had at last taken the field, and his army spread like a huge fan out through the southwestern part of the state.

But to Tim it was all too late. Price had already taken Lexington and everything else he wanted, and Frémont wasn't going to be quick enough to cut him off from going down into Arkansas. You don't move quick with forty thousand men and tents to sleep them and chuck wagons to feed them and barrels of water to keep them from getting thirsty, when all in the world the army would need to do was slap down on their bellies and drink from any of the thousands of springs.

Tim was glad his three months were up. He'd not have time to put out winter wheat before he joined again, but he could gather his corn, if there was any left in the fields.

Darkness was coming down earlier these October days, and though the air was warm by day, the nights were beginning to be chilly. He couldn't possibly make it in home before night, but this time he wasn't going to stop anywhere short of his own dooryard. He'd been getting himself all stirred up so he could tell Polly what he had to do about Harmony Blankinship's money before he did it.

There wasn't a light in Harmony's cabin as he passed. She must have taken her young ones to bed early. That was the way a body should do, use daylight and save on candles. He remembered his pa going to bed in the kitchen while light still showed pink at the windows.

There was a light at his house. Tim put his mule in the barn as he came past so that he wouldn't have to keep him on his mind, or maybe it was to put off five minutes longer the need to clear up everything. He strode to the house, whistling an old tune that Polly would remember so that she wouldn't be scared when she heard him at the door. It sounded shaky on the cool, dark air, and Tim found he hadn't enough wind to finish it before he hit the doorstone.

Polly stood there with a candle in her hand. "Tim," she called, "is that you?"

He stepped into the light. "It sure is, Polly."

"Merciful Father!" was all she could say.

She smelled of the good oak fire, the smooth soaped table, the spicy fragrance of fresh gingerbread. How could he ever have doubted that his heart was more at home with Polly than any place else in the world?

"Have you come to stay?" Her arms were still tight around him and her voice was almost steady.

"I'm afraid not. Mother, you been workin' too hard, you're gettin' mighty thin."

Her eyes filled and overflowed, but her face did not break into weeping. "So much has happened."

"The children?" Tim was afraid to speak out.

"They're all well."

"Honey Love too?"

"Her tooth has growed into the gap. She looks right pretty," Polly said.

Tim had to remind himself that he had something he must tell her. Something that might make her big eyes overflow again. He still didn't know what it was that made her so touched in the heart.

"Your ma, and pa?"

"They're all right." She took a square of cloth out of the pocket that was concealed in her skirt and wiped her eyes.

"Polly, I got to tell you somethin', and it's goin' to take some time to tell." He didn't look into her eyes, but off over her head to the fireplace where some new-cut gourds were drying on the mantel. He led her to the little chair that she'd always used when she rocked the children, and sat down himself in one of the split hickory kitchen chairs facing her, so that he could reach out and smooth her hand if he found he couldn't go on alone.

"It ain't nothin' I'm proud of, and I'd sooner take a beatin' than have you know, but I kind of made a bargain with the Lord, Polly, one day when I was about to be swung from a rope as a spy."

Polly drew a deep breath and let it out so slowly that Tim wanted to tell her to hurry so he could go on.

"And this bargain kind of concerns Harmony Blankinship."

This was going to hurt her, already without looking directly at her he could tell her eyes had filled again.

"But I got to do it, Polly, though it disgraces both of us and lays a kind of blame on the young uns that they'll hate to face, but they'll have to live it down. You see, Polly, when I came back from Californy——"

A sob like a sigh shook Polly.

Tim wished he didn't have to remind her of that. He'd been so cruel to her about little Arnett. He wished he could wipe that out of her memory, and his too.

"You see, Polly," it was so hard to find the words.

"Yes, Timothy." She was sitting very straight, her hands folded in her lap.

"Well, I stopped by Harmony Blankinship's on my way home, aimin' to make it all straight between her and me, but there set that horse trader with his hands just itchin', so I come on home and didn't give her the two hundred dollars that Blank sent by me to her."

Polly put her hands over her eyes and let herself cry.

"I know it was thievin', Polly, but I give that high corner of the land to the Lord, kind of hopin' I could free my conscience. And though I did buy that horse from Harmony for more money than he was worth and moved her down here on the place and kind of looked after her and her young uns all these years, it don't excuse me."

He had never known Polly to take anything so hard. "I know it was sinful, me settin' myself up as judge of how her money ort to be spent, I know that churchhouse I built is tainted, but now I've got to make it right."

It was hard to talk on to Polly with her crying so into her hands, but he couldn't reach out and touch her. She'd have to say she'd forgive him. That was what he was afraid of all the time. Somehow he'd known the Lord would forgive, but with humans it was different; humans were so proud and longer-memoried.

"Polly, I'm sorry, but we've got to git five hundred dollars some way, because that's what I owe Harmony Blankinship, if you count it ten per cent compound interest. And we've got to face public disgrace when she tells everybody, and maybe they'll want to tear down the church and sow the ground to salt."

"Oh, Tim, answer me just one thing: Why didn't you tell me all this years ago?" Polly was sitting straight again, her hands back in her lap, yet her face still broken up with crying.

"I don't know, unless it was that you allus was so proud and honest, that I——"

"Oh, Tim Larkin, you don't honest deserve what's goin' to happen to you!" Polly came over and stood beside him, her back to the fire. "You ain't said it, but I seem to gether that you never had truck with Harmony but to try to make up to her for usin' her money better than she'd have knowed how herself."

"I never was alone with Harmony Blankinship except the night after I found Newby."

"The year you paid her forty-dollar mortgage even? I've got to know the truth now, Tim Larkin."

Tim rose and strode to the waterbucket, his unoled boots creaking on the board floor. He turned when he had the gourd dipper gripped in his hand. "You mean, Polly Larkin, that you thought that little towheaded bastard of hers was mine?"

"Why wouldn't I?"

"But, Polly, I ain't ever been runnin' after women!" Tim remembered Lovie and Mima and what Harmony said about his eyes.

Polly sank down into her chair and started crying again. "All these years, Tim, that I've loved you to distraction and yet couldn't risk tellin' you I couldn't put up with Harmony Blankinship, for fear you'd tell me to take the young uns and go back to Pa. But a woman that loves a man as I've loved you has got no rightful pride. Since Honey Love was born I hadn't thought about it so much, because I knowed you loved me too, but it was like a worm eatin' in an apple, no matter how I'd polish up outside I knowed there was goin' to come a day——"

Tim Larkin had Polly up in his arms; he was laughing shakily. He couldn't tell her all that he was thinking, for it would sound like a preacher. Something about the same thing happening in

the country now where the very people who thought the most of each other were tight in their minds and confused.

"Polly, Polly," he rubbed his cheek against her forehead, "if I'd only a-told you! But how could I have knowed . . . Maybe some good come out of me gettin' so mighty close to a hempin'."

Polly suddenly held him at arm's length so she could look into his face. "But it's too late to make it up to Harmony."

Tim wondered if he was going to have to get stubborn with Polly as he had about that highest spot of land.

"Harmony died two weeks ago from a briar she got in her finger. That's why Bulah ain't here. She's down stayin' nights with the young uns. Me and Mrs. Newby are seein' after the family."

"Dead!" Once again he'd been saved. He went over to the chair and held onto its back. Tim knew he wasn't honestly glad Harmony had died; no, he wasn't, but he couldn't help admitting he was mighty relieved. It wasn't just the money, for he knew now that he would, through the years, spend much more than five hundred dollars on Harmony's outfit, but he wouldn't have to bow before the community. He could live in honor and respect. In that instant he knew he had never been worthy of the good that had come to him.

"She told me at the last that you'd never been anything to her but a good friend," Polly said softly, "but I didn't believe her. I thought she just told me because she felt I was helpin' care for her and she owed me that much."

"Poor Harmony never quite knowed what she wanted."

"Oh, I'd not say that, Tim!"

Polly's tongue hadn't lost any of its old vinegar.

"Now, Mother," Tim grinned down at her.

"But I do think, Tim, that maybe you'll be more useful in this community without havin' to crawl before Harmony Blankinship or anybody else." Her head was high and her wide-set eyes serious. "After all this trouble is over we're all goin' to need a lot of religion to get us back together again. Folks is strange,

Tim. They's some that might feel their religion was a little tainted if they'd have to recollect ever' Sunday that the church they went to was a gift before the Lord to cover sin."

Tim thought so too.

"They forget that the Lord takes care of the sanctification." She reached up and ran her fingers across his heavy brows. "I guess I'm most of all thankful that the Lord thought you was worth savin'."

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